

A study guide  
for the film

# This Is Your Museum Speaking



National  
Film Board  
of Canada

Office  
national du film  
du Canada



## About the Film



Museums are more than mere graveyards for relics from the past. This discovery is made by the night watchman and his dog Fang, when, one memorable night, incredible characters emerge from the walls and halls of the museum.

The night watchman is introduced to this unusual society by the resident muse, a flamboyant lady of flaming red locks. Together they witness an 18<sup>th</sup>-century duel, converse with a Rembrandt painting, and question an Egyptian Pharaoh.

Early morning visitors at the museum door bring the watchman back to reality, but it is a reality that will never be quite the same. He no longer views the present as severed from the past. Even the cars whizzing by him echo the chariots of a time long past.

This film uses the magic of animation to show the importance of museums in our lives. It strips the museum of its forbidding image and demonstrates that with just a little imagination we can use a museum's treasures as stepping stones — to step back in time to experience events and feelings from the past, a past that can illuminate the present.



## A Brief History of Museums for Children

If we look at the origin of museums, we see that they date back to the latter part of the third century B.C. when Ptolemy Sotor founded a museum and library in the port city of Alexandria. After the fourth century A.D. and throughout the Middle Ages, churches often fulfilled the function of museums, preserving and displaying not only religious artifacts but also curiosities thought to illustrate the mystical qualities of religion: oddities such as the egg of an ostrich, the rib of a whale, or the horn of a "unicorn."

It was not until the Renaissance in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century that the study of objects in more realistic terms was encouraged. Individuals and scholarly societies set up collections, but access to these was confined to a privileged few. This announcement from a London newspaper, dated September 13<sup>th</sup>, 1773, bears witness:

This is to inform the publick that being tired out with the insolence of the common People, who I have indulged with a sight of my museum,

I am now come to the resolution of refusing admittance to the lower class except they come provided with a ticket from some Gentleman or Lady of my acquaintance. They will not be admitted during the time of Gentlemen and Ladies.

It took the French Revolution in 1789 to force museums, including the Louvre, to open their doors to the public.

Today, museums are very open institutions, their treasures on view for the public, students and scientists. And museums continue to evolve. The dusty and often somber museum is becoming a more inviting cultural center geared to the interests of all those who would like to know more about the past.





## Behind the Scenes

The National Museums of Canada, the federal agency which houses Canada's national collection, defines four major functions for museums:

- COLLECTING
- PRESERVING
- STUDYING
- EDUCATION

A museum's **COLLECTION** is its accumulation of objects gathered for display, study, or comparison. The collection may include artifacts, seldom intended for exhibition, or works of art. They are selected because they are thought to represent something of significance about a culture, an environment, an event or a movement in art. The kind of objects chosen, and the way they are organized and presented, defines a museum.

Once a collection has been chosen, it must be cared for. That brings us to **PRESERVATION**. Museum collections are, like oil and gas, a nonrenewable resource. Many objects, in order to prevent their deterioration, must be stored at a specific temperature and humidity. Many artifacts arrive at the museum in less than perfect shape, and must be very carefully cleaned and restored before storage.

For example, consider the task of preparing a shoe for a museum exhibit. Take off a shoe and put it on your desk. How does it look? Is it covered with dirt or salt and the corrosive acids and minerals that these contain? Are there any stains or rips to repair? Loose stitching? A loose heel? What would you have to do to make your shoe suitable for display? Do you think that your great great great grandchild will be able to see the shoes that children wore in the 1980s?

The third function of a museum is to promote **STUDY** or research. Every item has its own story, and it is a museum curator's role to study that object and learn its story, to interpret it for the public. For example, in *This Is Your Museum Speaking* you will see the dinosaur *Allosaurus*. Since dinosaurs became extinct before there were people on earth to see them, how do we know what living dinosaurs looked like? All we have now are the dinosaur's bones. From the bones, the curator reassembles the dinosaur and draws conclusions about

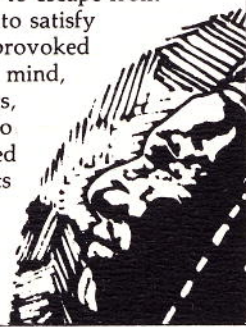
the reptile's habits and habitat. The curator uses his or her specialized knowledge, and imagination as well, to interpret the evidence for the general public.

Imagine, for instance, that you have never seen a turkey but are expected to determine what one looks like. Your only clue is a plate of discarded turkey bones. First you would have to sort out the bones. Then you would have to fit the bones together and try to decide where the muscles are attached and how big they are. You would also have to figure out where the organs are, decide on a posture, cover the body with skin and color it. Prehistoric material and fossilized bones are much harder to work with than the remnants of a Thanksgiving dinner. Remember that dinosaurs were sometimes as large as two school buses. In addition, the researcher has many other questions to answer, such as "Why did the dinosaur become extinct?" They're still working on that one.

**EDUCATION** is the final and most visible function of museums. Museum collections can act as references for scholars studying a particular subject, just as books in libraries provide references for students. When objects from different times and places are brought together in an exhibit they can inspire new perspectives on past eras. Sometimes an exhibit is organized with an accompanying educational program.

Dioramas are a special kind of educational exhibit. They are a re-creation (or simulation) of a whole environment. They might, for example, show a moose foraging in a meadow for food or the reconstruction of a pioneer room.

Today visitors go to museums for many reasons. They may wish to see beautiful objects, or to escape from their everyday world. They may go to satisfy their intellectual curiosity, or to be provoked by the unusual. With these things in mind, museums today are designing exhibits, educational programs and activities to reach a wider audience. It is estimated that Canadians make 20 million visits a year to museums. Are you one of the visitors?





## Before Screening the Film

The following are some of the objects which are included in *This Is Your Museum Speaking*:

- a Haida Indian totem pole
- *Portrait of a Man with a Magnifying Glass*, a painting by Rembrandt
- *Sunflowers*, a painting by Van Gogh
- *The Thinker*, a sculpture by Rodin
- *Mona Lisa*, a painting by Leonardo da Vinci
- *Landscape Painting*, a painting by Tom Thomson
- *Weeping Woman*, a painting by Pablo Picasso
- an 18<sup>th</sup>-century glove
- a French Canadian table scene, circa 1740
- a skeleton of the dinosaur *Allosaurus*
- a beaded Iroquois moccasin, circa 1830
- a steam engine, circa 1870
- a Roman racing chariot, circa 100 A.D.

Have students do research on these paintings and artifacts and relate them to their creator's life or the era in which they were used. (If they were the curator of an art gallery, would they want to include *Sunflowers* by Van Gogh in their collection? What story might an 18<sup>th</sup>-century glove tell us about life in the palace of Versailles?)



## After Screening the Film

### Questions for Discussion

1. Who has been to a museum? What did you really think about it? Did you find it interesting, confusing, colorful, quiet, stuffy? Did you feel something was missing? Do you think the filmmaker, Lynn Smith, likes museums? Why? What is she encouraging us, as museum goers, to do?
2. Which era would you like to have lived in? Why? Support your choice by evidence which could be found in a museum. Consider the things which would be absent from that era (e.g. telephone, TV, daily bath).
3. What if you went to a museum and actually discovered an ancestor or a clue to your own past? Who or what might it be? How would you know?
4. Do you think the invention of the camera made portrait painting obsolete? Some people feel that the camera freed the painter. What do they mean? Would you rather have a photograph or a painted portrait of someone you care about?
5. If you were trapped inside a painting, which one would you like to be in, and why? Describe the colors, temperature, weather, feelings, music, etc. Re-create the environment.



## Publications Available Free of Charge

### *Follow-up Activities*

1. Ask some students to look up the origin of the word museum. Have them research who the muses were and what they were known for. The film, *This Is Your Museum Speaking*, shows the filmmaker's interpretation of a muse. Have students research different renditions of the muses, and, based on their findings and their own feelings on the subject, paint, draw or sculpt their own vision of a muse.
2. Have students construct dioramas based on ordinary places in their lives (i.e. their bedroom, garage, neighborhood) and later discuss the dioramas, and what information a person in the year 2090 would be able to glean from them about our society.
3. Have students prepare a cultural profile of the class. Ask them to bring in photos and artifacts which represent their families. Where did the families originate? What holidays do they celebrate? What food do they eat? Have various students present a profile of his or her family to the others — through books made by themselves, or perhaps a slide show or a taped recording of an elder family member recalling the past. They should consider, as a museum curator would, how to convey their information in the most interesting way.
4. Have students pretend they live in the year 2100 and must write the history of an antique article of clothing from their home. When was it made? Who made it? Who wore it? What is its story? Why did it survive?
5. Have some students make an inventory of their community's museums and heritage centers. (City Hall and local tourist bureaus and Historical Societies are good sources of information.) Have them compile a list of forthcoming events, educational programs, and tours which they might take advantage of, or, ask students to research the history and development of a local museum. When was it founded? Why? By whom?

### *Clear-cast Plastic Resin*

Info Sheet No. 5  
Nova Scotia Museum  
1747 Summer Street  
Halifax, N.S.  
B3H 3A6

### *Habitat Groups*

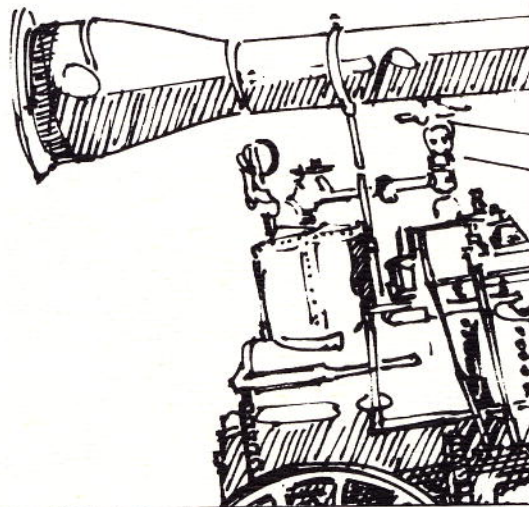
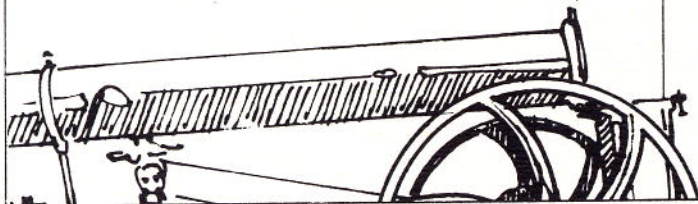
Provincial Museum & Archives of Alberta  
12845 — 102 Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta  
T5N 0M6

### *To Prepare and Bleach a Skull*

Info Sheet No. 26  
Nova Scotia Museum  
1747 Summer Street  
Halifax, N.S.  
B3H 3A6

### *Principles of Museum Display*

Reference List No. 77  
The Provincial Museum & Archives of Alberta  
12845 — 102 Avenue  
Edmonton, Alberta  
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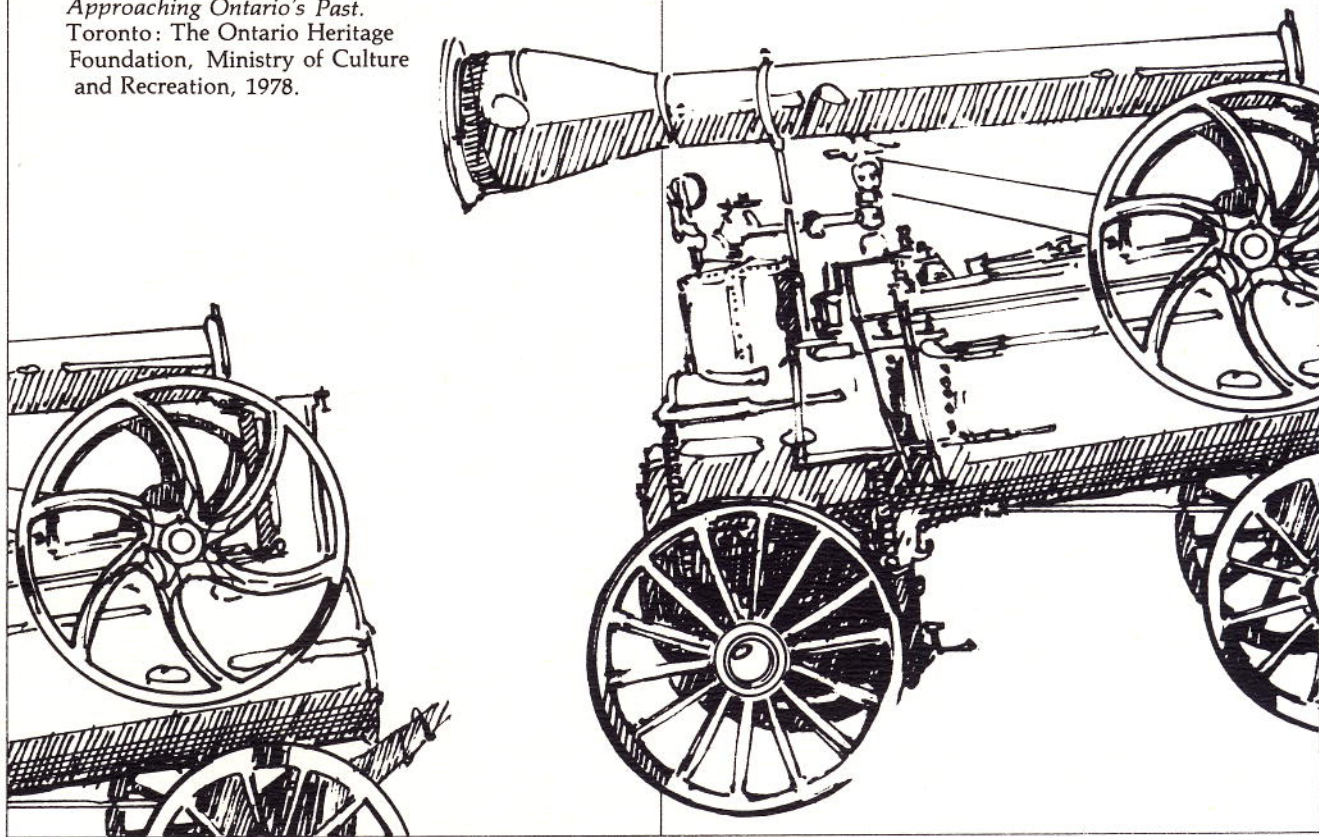
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Screening time: 12 minutes 59 seconds

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