

Unique collection of Indian artefacts to be displayed at Canada House



Beaded bags

Photo: Hanover Studios, London

For the past 20 years, June Bedford has been collecting items of Victorian souvenir art that were produced by Canadian Indians and brought back to Europe to decorate houses.

Now her collection of more than 400 items of Canadian Indian beadwork hats, bags and moccasins, moose-hair embroidery and porcupine-quill decoration will form the core of an exhibition at Canada House, Trafalgar Square, from July 3 to August 13.

Titled *Mohawk, Micmac, Maliseet and other souvenir art from Victorian Canada*, the exhibition will feature an original Victorian living-room setting that will show how these souvenir items were actually displayed.

It will also show the richness of design and the creative spirit of Canadian Indians, and emphasize the native and non-native aspects of a uniquely Canadian culture.

BY J.C.H. KING

Assistant Keeper at the Museum of Mankind, London, responsible for the North American Collection

During the 19th century, Canadian Indians embroidered vast quantities of birchbark and cloth utensils with moosehair, porcupine quills and glass beads. While much of this material was made and used domestically, a whole range of non-native artefacts was created and sold to Europeans.

In the second half of the 19th century, the South Kensington Museum — now the Victoria and Albert Museum — acquired examples of Canadian artefacts for its collection of commercial materials made of animal products. These included moosehair and porcupine quillwork. While these items have been appreciated by some people in Britain (and in Canada, the United States and Europe), they have more often been ignored — and even looked down upon especially by anthropologists, because they were not made for traditional purposes. However, such attitudes are now changing.

Many, if not most, of the early travellers and explorers in Canada collected native objects for a variety of reasons. Some objects, such as the Indian costumes commissioned and brought to England in the 18th century from colonial wars, were designed to glorify the deeds of soldiers. Other objects, such as model canoes, dolls and the like, were acquired as typical Indian objects; while still others — wampum belts, tomahawks and scalps — were collected as objects of cultural significance that were readily identifiable symbols of native life.

However, by the middle of the 19th century, this

demand for Indian artefacts had assumed a different character. It was then possible to acquire not just Indian style clothing, but also a myriad of standard Victorian artefacts made of, or decorated with, traditional Indian materials.

These Victorian-style native artefacts were incorporated into European life in North America and Europe. Their impact on European design was limited, however — especially in comparison with Oriental artefacts during the same period. It was only in this century — with the employment of textiles from the Southwest of the United States, and the use of North American and Mexican geometric forms in Art Deco — that the art of the Americas contributed to the mainstream of Western design.

Four main traditions

Nelson Graburn, Professor of Anthropology at the University of California in Berkeley, has produced a scheme that describes both the origins and the destinations of art forms made by native people for non-native use. At the first level, Graburn says, the native society will produce objects such as embroidered moccasins or decorated boxes for its own use; it will then expand this into a commercial tradition, selling, say, moccasins to tourists at Niagara Falls, or quilled boxes to sailors and maritime traders. At the second level, new ideas, techniques and materials — such as glass beads or cloth — will be individually incorporated into a synthetic part-native, part-European