

The lights are going dim in Canada's underfunded museums. If things don't change, we could lose sight of who we are, **CHARLOTTE GRAY** argues

Under wraps

Imagine a museum filled with intriguing objects from our past. The cloak that General Wolfe wore at the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, perhaps. Or the skull of the dinosaur that explorer Joseph Tyrrell dug up in Alberta's Red River Valley in 1884, launching the first North American dinosaur hunt. Or the extraordinary crystal and steel "Great Ring of Canada" that Lyndon Johnson presented to Lester Pearson during his visit to Montreal's Expo 67 — the ugliest table decoration I've ever seen, and a fitting symbol for the U.S. President's relationship with our Prime Minister.

I hope you can envisage these resonant articles from our history, because you are increasingly unlikely to feast your eyes on the real things. Items like these, crucial to what academics call our "material history," belong in museums where citizens and scholars can enjoy a tactile relationship with our past. But if you've visited one of Canada's more than 2,000 museums and heritage sites recently, you may have noticed that the dust is thickening and the lights are dimming in some galleries.

Government funding for museums and historic sites has been dropping steadily for the past two decades. One of the best small museums in the country (and one of my favourites), the Alexander Graham Bell National Historic Site in Baddeck, N.S., for instance, needs at least \$1-million to repair its roof. Where is the money going to come from?

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Bell's photos can't be seen

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Federal funding, through the Museums Assistance Program, remains stuck at 1972 levels. Museums have reduced their dependence on public money in the last decade — down to 62 per cent of their revenues from 71 — but their costs have risen 22 per cent in that period.

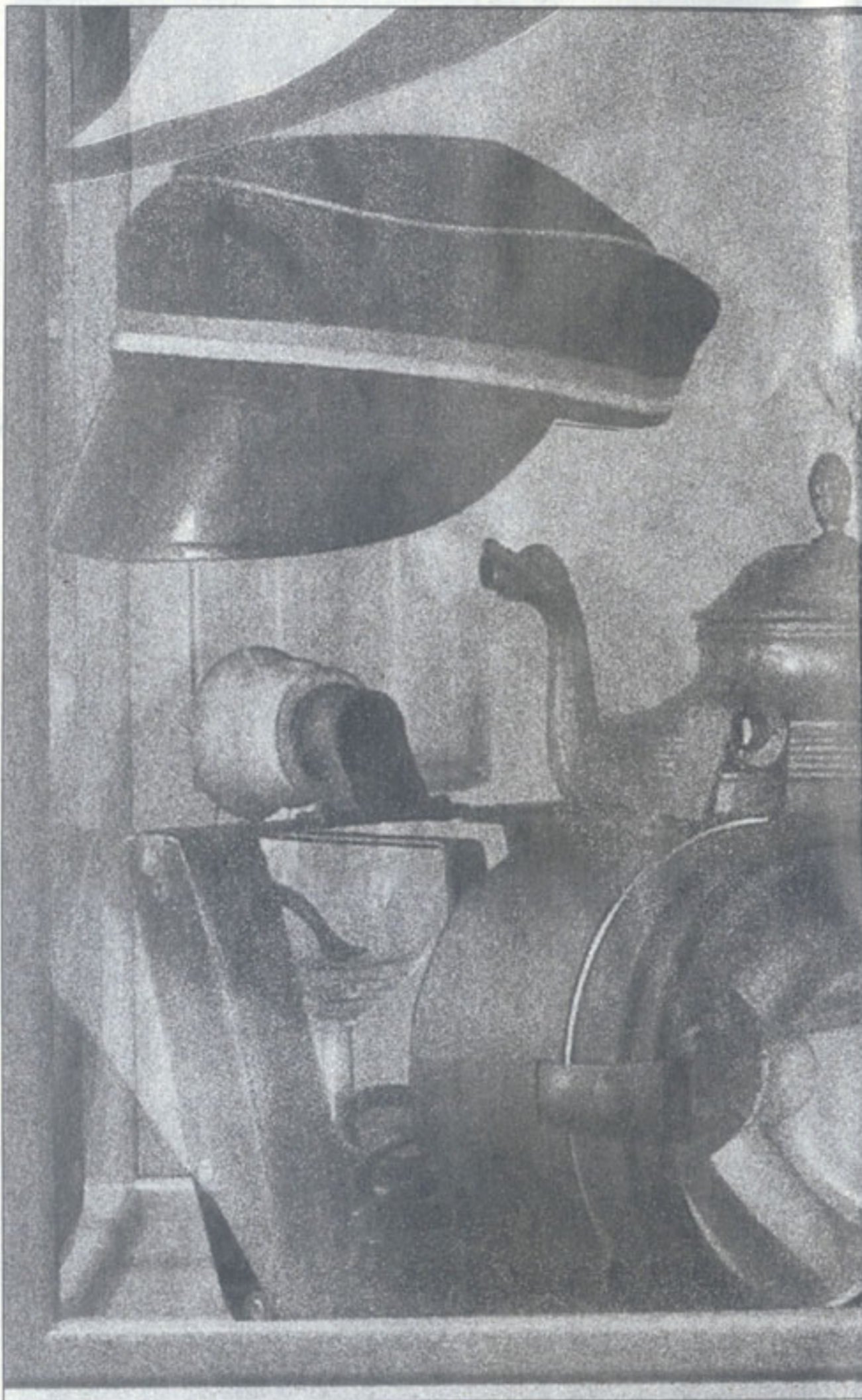
Whining about underfunding is a chronic condition in the Canadian public sector, whether your employer is an arts council, a library or a university. And it is easy to allow glittering good news, such as the renovation of Toronto's Royal Ontario Museum, or the imminent opening of Ottawa's brand-new Canadian War Museum, to blind us to deterioration elsewhere. But the underfunding crisis is real, and it is exacerbating a more fundamental problem: confusion about what museums are for.

The traditional role for museums was to collect, study and present artifacts. Museum scholarship is a different kind of scholarship from universities, where historians usually rely on texts (treaties, parliamentary acts, official papers, personal diaries and so on) as their primary sources. Museum curators study the items in their collections, placing each one securely in its historical and intellectual context so that museum visitors can understand them.

In the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, for instance, there is a stained cotton hood with two clownish eyeholes and a rubber tube hanging from the mouth. A casual museum visitor might just scoff that it looks like a prop for a *Saturday Night Live* sketch, were it not for the careful background research produced by curator Tim Cook. Thanks to Cook, we can learn that it is a First World War gas mask, designed by Newfoundland physician Cluny Macpherson and known to battle-weary troops as "the google-eyed booger with the tit." As you stare at this strange, smothering artifact that some prairie lad in the trenches at Ypres tugged over his head, you get some idea of the claustrophobia and terror he probably felt. This is three-dimensional history.

But that kind of museum research is under threat. The Bell museum in Baddeck has a priceless collection of Bell's personal photographs taken over a century ago. They capture the inventor's extraordinarily imaginative hydrofoil designs, and his own ebullient personality. However, you cannot see them because the Bell museum can't afford the expertise to catalogue them properly.

Museum curators also decide what their institutions should collect right now, from both the present and the past, to enrich our understanding of Canadian history. "We must always be thinking," ex-



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plains Laura Brandon, Curator of War Art at the Canadian War Museum, "about what we need so that future generations can see our lives today in their completeness." Unplanned acquisitions create gaps. Warfare, for instance, was once viewed as an exclusively male activity, which means that the war museum has tons of guns and medals but little on women's lives during wartime — no 1940s wedding dresses made of parachute silk, for example, or old copies of *Chatelaine* with

committed curatorial staff. But some of their Current Attractions have the whiff of elegant middle-aged women desperately investing in Botox.

I'm not suggesting that museums cannot achieve both popular appeal and intellectual rigour. Recently, I visited the section on the American Presidency in Washington's well-funded Museum of American History. There was plenty of pull-'em-in appeal there, with such contemporary symbols as Bill Clinton's saxophone and the red lace dress that Laura Bush wore to her husband's first inauguration. ("Ooh," said the little girl next to me, as she gawked at the dress, "Gorgeous — but scratchy.") There was also a well-reasoned account of the development of presidential powers, illustrated by more than 900 artifacts on display, and a description of how presidential inaugurations have evolved into media events. A museum can attract tourists at the same time as it is systematically adding to its holdings and telling a story.

Perhaps the confusion in Canadian museums originates not only from tight budgets, but also from uncertainty about what story we are telling. Any museum in France, Britain or the United States effortlessly tells the tales of a collective endeavour: creating the community, building the nation, conquering adversity, winning the war. But Canadians are so apologetic about our history — constantly grovelling about the racism or sexism of past eras — that we rarely attempt a coherent narrative. So we make do with bits and pieces, and allow museum scholarship to dry up.

The museum community is so concerned about the erosion of research within its institutions that it organized a museum-research summit in Ottawa that ends today. Organizers expected about 100 participants: About 200 people are attending.

Without museum research, and sufficient well-trained curators, there is a real danger that within a generation or two we may have warehouses filled with great stuff that nobody knows much about, because the only museum staff left will be guides and gift-shop workers. Future visitors will be able to stare at Lyndon Johnson's gift to Lester Pearson — but nobody will be able to tell them what it is, where it comes from, or why it is significant.

Charlotte Gray is the author of The Museum Called Canada (Random House Canada) and winner of the Pierre Berton award for popularizing Canadian history.

Wednesday in Globe Review: Kate Taylor on the museums' political fight to come.