

# Creating metaculture: Community-based work with the University of Victoria's Williams Bequest

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## Abstract

*The current use of the Michael Williams Collection at the University of Victoria provides a case study of a curating practice that develops and challenges Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's idea of metaculture. The collection itself may suggest the point of critical engagement for students developed by the teacher, who weaves in themes that are suggested by the history of that material. I will attempt to show my efforts to produce such a nexus through my recent efforts at working with the Williams bequest at the University of Victoria.*

## Introduction

The University of Victoria's Art Collection plays a significant role in shaping the university's identity both on campus and off. The director of the collection, Martin Segger, along with curator Caroline Riedel have enriched the university's reputation through the loan of pieces such as Emily Carr's *Happiness* (1939) for inclusion in art exhibitions at the National Gallery of Canada, the Musée des Beaux Arts, the Vancouver Art Gallery, and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.<sup>1</sup> Segger and Riedel have also woven pieces from the collection into the fabric of the university environment, as exemplified by the installation of sculptures in the campus's main quadrangle, the displays of prints and objects in administrative and educational buildings, and the presentation of exhibitions at the university's two main galleries – The Maltwood, located on the suburban campus, and the Legacy Gallery and Café situated in downtown Victoria.

Over the years, the art collection has served multiple agendas. It began in the 1950s, as a teaching collection for the institution's predecessor – Victoria College. Over the next fifty years, the collection grew in size from about 50 pieces to more than 27,000, through commissions, purchases, and gifts. In 1963, the university received by bequest the home and collection of English born sculptor and antiquarian Katharine Maltwood and her husband John. This formed the base of UVic's Western and Oriental arts collections. Today, the University Art Collection is composed of a number of minor collections that reflect specific themes, the biographies of artists, and gifts by major donors.

In addition to the increase in the number of pieces, the collection's function has broadened as well; in 2001, the Department of Community Relations, which is within the Division of External Relations, took charge of the University Art Collection and galleries (SEGGER 2008, 54–55). According to the Department of Community Relations webpage, the University Art Collection and University Art Galleries currently have a mandate to support "UVic participation in community initiatives. These include sponsorships, program partner-ships and attendance at fundraising and charitable events."<sup>2</sup> In this regard, the University Art Collection and university galleries, and especially the downtown Legacy Gallery, now play an important role in the



Fig. 1 - Legacy Art Gallery and Café Exterior © University of Victoria

<sup>1</sup> REIDEL, C. 2009. Exhibition history, email correspondence, Nov 12.

<sup>2</sup> University of Victoria External Relations, [www.external.uvic.ca/community/](http://www.external.uvic.ca/community/) (accessed October 15, 2009).



Fig. 2 - Legacy Art Gallery and Café Interior © University of Victoria

Gallery (PETERSON 2002). As part of the largest donation ever received by this still rather young academic institution, the Williams Collection holds great significance, and is woven into the fabric of the university's academic identity. This relation is most concretely demonstrated by the fact that the most significant portion of the collection is furnishings used in academic ceremonies, commissioned by Williams specifically for university functions, including the Chancellor's chair, kneeling stool, mace stand, speaker's staff, and lectern (fig. 3). But the Williams Bequest also plays a significant outreach role, as is suggested by the fact that the university's President and Vice-chancellor, David Turpin, uses the Legacy Gallery to host breakfast meetings with city council members and other local interest groups.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 3 - The Ceremonial Furniture Suite for The University of Victoria – Commissioned by Michael Williams, 1993 © University of Victoria

applied in practice. In short: my efforts build upon the tangible and intangible functions of the Williams Bequest.

development and stewardship of the university's patrons (fig. 1–2).

One donor collection of the particular importance for the university, and specifically of strategic importance, is The Michael Williams Bequest, a gift left to the university by the late Victoria businessman and developer, Michael Collard Williams, comprises about 1,000 pieces that was added to the art collection in 2001. The Williams Bequest is part of a 17.5 million dollar estate that included art, antiques, and a collection of downtown buildings, including one that houses the Legacy

The Williams Bequest also supports an academic position in the History in Art Department. In 2008, I joined the faculty as the Williams Legacy Chair in Modern and Contemporary Arts of the Pacific Northwest. My brief includes researching and curating objects in the Williams Bequest, developing a program of research that pays “special attention to engagement of the broader community”, as well as the interrelated pedagogic mission to use the collection “to develop experiential learning opportunities”.<sup>4</sup> The emphasis on community-engaged research and teaching roughly parallels the agenda to support community initiatives of the Division of External Relations, yet the Williams Legacy Chair and its program are firmly rooted within the context of an academic department focused on the study of art history. This combined charge is unusual. The purpose of this paper, then, is to chart out a preliminary strategy that I have chosen for negotiating my role curating (i.e. taking care of) the Williams Collection. Below, I present a philosophical basis for my practices of community-engaged research, and teaching, followed by the philosophy

<sup>3</sup> Legacy Gallery, Events Schedule, Legacy Gallery, 2009–2010.

<sup>4</sup> University of Victoria's History in Art Department, *Endowed Chair in Modern and Contemporary Arts of the Pacific Northwest*, College Art Association, spring 2008.

## Intangible heritage/metaculture

Museum studies scholar and anthropologist Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's 2004 essay *Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production: Intangible Production*, examines the 'arbitrariness' and 'interrelatedness' of UNESCO's definitions of 'tangible', 'natural', and 'intangible heritage' and argues that institutionalization of heritage produces something new – what she refers to as 'metaculture'. Although she is focused on UNESCO's definitions, her analysis is a useful point of entry for thinking about the multiple institutional roles of the Williams Collection at the University of Victoria. In the following, I begin by summarizing some of the key points of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's essay and then use them to help us better understand the Williams Collection in relation to multiple university objectives.

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's essay begins with an overview of UNESCO's constructions of three types of heritage: tangible, natural, and intangible. 'Tangible heritage', she observes, consists of monuments or sites of "historical, aesthetic, archaeological, scientific, ethnological or anthropological value" (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT 2004, 52). As with tangible heritage, 'natural heritage' refers to remarkable sites, landscapes of scientific or aesthetic value, or "habitats of threatened plants or animal species and areas of value on scientific or aesthetic grounds or from the point of view of conservation" (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT 2004, 53). She goes on to observe that, over the years, UNESCO has come to acknowledge human impact on nature as part of 'natural heritage'. Unlike tangible heritage, natural heritage has a systemic orientation.

As the title of her paper suggests, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett is more concerned with the idea of 'intangible heritage', which has come to replace folklore as a heritage model. She notes that this shift corresponds to a movement away from supporting

"the work of scholars and institutions to document and preserve a record of disappearing traditions to one that seeks to sustain a living, if endangered tradition by supporting the conditions necessary for cultural reproduction. This means according value to the 'carriers' and transmitters of traditions, as well as to their habitus and habitat" (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT 2004, 55).

She then charts some of the ways in which definitions of the intangible overlaps with the tangible and with natural; the intangible and tangible are both considered to be culture, while the intangible and the natural are both holistic.

Although this shift was designed to overcome some of the problems embedded in the earlier folklore model, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also finds the idea of intangible heritage itself problematic. These changes have produced the need for highly skilled workers, internationally agreed upon terminology, mechanisms for developing and implementing cultural policies such as preservation lists, archives and research centers – a series of institutions, including UNESCO; institutions that she collectively refers to as the 'heritage enterprise' (KIRSHENBLATT-GIMBLETT 2004, 55). For example, the very idea of intangible heritage is a product of the heritage enterprise: it does not preexist or exist outside of these institutional frameworks. In this regard, it is a form of 'metaculture' rather than heritage 'per se'.

## Intangible properties of the Williams Collection

Despite the shortcoming that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett finds with the idea of intangible heritage, the utility it finds for the surrounding environment provides a useful context for relating the various roles the Williams Bequest plays at the University of Victoria. In this particular case, the intangible properties can be revealed through the supplement of a survey of some details of his life.

Michael Collard Williams was born in 1930 in Shropshire England and died seventy years later on a flight 'en route' from Victoria, British Columbia back to his motherland. Williams moved to Canada in





Fig. 4 - Williams Herding Sheep along Yates Street during a Victoria Day Parade © Photo: Bill Halkett



Fig. 5 - Swans Hotel at night © University of Victoria

1950. He first settled in central British Columbia and then to Vancouver Island in 1958. With little formal education, Williams first drew upon his training as a shepherd and opened a dog kennel in which he bred border collies in Langford, a community on the outskirts of the greater Victoria area. In the 1960s, Williams became a regular participant in local celebrations of Canada's official commemoration of the Queen's birthday, Victoria Day, by demonstrating his shepherding skills as part of the Victoria Day parade as it moved through the streets of downtown Victoria (fig. 4) (MCNENEY 2001).

Williams also helped shepherd the revitalization of Victoria's built environment. By the 1970s, Williams was one of several entrepreneurs who began redeveloping an area of Victoria known as Old Town. Williams renovated more than a dozen heritage buildings along lower Johnson Street as well as a 1950 Toronto Dominion Bank building on Broad Street, which is now the home of the Legacy Gallery and Café. At the heart of his revitalization program, Williams focused on renovating a granary built in 1913 into a hotel and brewpub that Williams christened *The Swans* to evoke Hans Christian Anderson's tale of transformation (fig. 5). Williams positioned his business as a boutique art hotel. His expanding art collection of contemporary Northwest Coast art was displayed through the hotel's public spaces and private rooms.

Williams was also passionate about improving the lives of Victoria's homeless community, and he engaged with artists who had an intimate acquaintance with the life ways of Victoria's indigent community. For example, in 1992 Michael Lewis, who worked in a homeless shelter, created an acrylic on canvas painting that depicts six members of an interracial group of homeless people known as The Apple Tree Gang. The Apple Tree Gang often gathered in an empty lot just a block away from Williams' Swans Hotel. In another piece also found in the Williams Collection, artist Ken Flett recorded the life ways of Victoria's homeless community in a series of monumental images that commemorate the lives of local individuals, such as his 1995 portrait of *Alistar Starbuck Reading From His Book of Revelations* (1995) and a portrait of *Vernon Jack* (1995), which depicts a member of The Apple Tree Gang. Moreover, he collected works by artists who were themselves insecurely housed, artists such as the eminent Norval Morrisseau.

Williams also tried to transform the lives of Victoria's homeless population and particularly members of The Apple Tree Gang with whom he had become friends and that included finding them shelter. During the winter of 1991, two members of the Apple Tree Gang died of exposure. The following November, Williams and a group of downtown businessmen financed and organized the installation of a prefabricated homeless shelter under the Blue Bridge in the waterfront area near Old Town. The shelter was made of glass and metal, had a gravel floor, and was heated by a wooden stove.

According to a 1992 *Victoria Times Colonist* report, Williams “wanted a place where chronic alcoholics could pass out – a more pleasant alternative to being hauled off to the drunk tank” (WILSON 1992). Williams then went on to liken the use of a structure for such purposes to a clean needle program. The structure ended up being used primarily by members of The Apple Tree Gang. Within three months of the shelter’s installation, a fire broke out, sending one man to hospital. Within days of the fire, the Coast Guard removed the structure for “safety reasons” and referred to the shelter as “a death trap” (LAVOIE 1993). Despite the shelter’s short lifespan, Williams remained dedicated to issues of homelessness until his own death nine years later in 2001.

As the above biographical account suggests, Williams was a businessman, and art collector who was dedicated to community projects that he thought would improve Victoria’s downtown environment. In these biographical details we discover what might not be entirely evident from a survey of the collection’s tangible properties alone: Williams’ personal concerns with urbanism and poverty – intangible properties from which we may construct a metaculture.

### Building a practice of community engaged curating

How should the Williams Collection be utilized now that it belongs to the University of Victoria? During my first three years – a period that is half complete at the time of writing – I have chosen to approach the task by critically reflecting on the concerns about tangible, intangible, and metaculture as they relate the donor with urbanity and urban poverty. I attempt to present these concerns as they are reflected with the material provided within his collection, and use the Williams Collection as a point of entry for students to develop a critical curatorial process in relationship to the greater Victoria community.

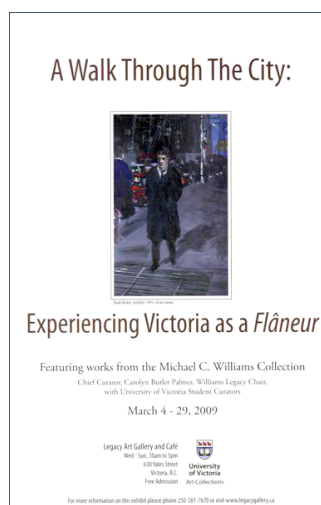


Fig. 6 - *A Walk through the City: Experiencing Victoria as a Flâneur* exhibition poster © Photo: Kim Drabyk

During my first semester at the University of Victoria, I held a competition that invited my students to develop exhibition proposals based on Williams’ art collection, one of which would be realized in the spring of 2009 at the Legacy Gallery. My goals for the exhibition design seminar were not only to allow my students to create a sense of community among themselves, but to honor Michael Williams and the cultural intersections mapped by his collection as well. One of my students, Magdalyn Asimaskis, proposed an exhibit that tapped into Williams’ urban sensibilities by evoking Baudelaire’s idea of the ‘flâneur’ – an observer of urban life.

In the spring semester seminar we mounted an exhibit that developed Ms. Asimaskis’s proposal. The exhibit, called *A Walk through the City: Experiencing Victoria as Flâneur*, played upon contemporary urban sensibilities of downtown Victoria and the multisensory experiences that are available in the setting of a café gallery (fig. 6). Playing upon Beaudelaire’s concept of the ‘flâneur’, members of the class selected images from the Williams Collection that corresponded to urban experiences of “people watching”, “anonymity”, “moving through the city”, and “ephemera”.

The exhibition was mounted in a small space behind the main gallery and coffee bar. Although this space is usually configured as a more conventional exhibition space without tables and chairs, we moved some of the cafe tables into the Legacy’s backroom gallery, inviting members of our audience to experience the sense of taste while viewing our installation of images. We also installed a CD player that provided a series of found sounds that members of the class had recorded on the streets of Victoria, including footsteps, buskers, busses, seagulls, and voices. The exhibit did not end at the

gallery's walls, but rather it spilled over into the streets of Victoria. Students plastered signs to the



Fig. 7 - *A Walk through the City: Experiencing Victoria as a Flâneur* street poster © Photo: Veronica Best



Fig. 8 - *A Walk through the City: Experiencing Victoria as a Flâneur* street poster © Photo: Veronica Best

street poles of Victoria that called attention to the exhibit and made provocative statements such as “Look Around You” and others that asked “Taking a Walk through the City?” and “Are You Aware?” (fig. 7–8).

I have conceived the second year's exhibit, *Regarding Wealth*, to build upon the work of the street-based theme of last year's *flâneur* project, adding the focus of local poverty.<sup>5</sup> Given Williams' engagement with various facets of Victoria's urban poor, a focus upon homelessness as a cross-cultural condition is, I believe, a particularly apt one. Despite Williams' efforts more than a decade

ago, homelessness remains a concern in Victoria. In July 2009, Victoria's Mayor, Dean Fortin, who also co-chairs the Coalition to End Homelessness, set 2018 as the target date to house the 1,600 who are currently living without roofs over their heads.<sup>6</sup> I do not expect an art exhibit to end homelessness, but by exhibiting the work of insecurely housed artists such as Norval Morriseau, and some lesser-known artists in the Williams Bequest Collection as well, I hope that we can contribute a picture, if only a partial view, of homeless people as creative people. At the same time, we honor the spirit of Michael Williams, and connect with the practice of a civically engaged art collector. Plans have also been laid for the 2010–2011 academic year to curate works of art from the University of Victoria's art collection at ACCESS health, a public health clinic in downtown Victoria that serves its homeless community. So, we have art specifically for, as well as from, the urban homeless presented in this scheme.

### Conclusions: Creating metaculture

In this paper, I developed Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's argument that heritage preservation is an unattainable ideal and her idea that third-party engagement with heritage produces something new – metaculture. I have sketched a process of developing a metaculture within the museum studies environment that depends on critical engagement focused upon the tangible properties of the collection and the intangible properties of its collector; the Williams Bequest Collection developed out of Michael Williams concerns for urbanism and poverty. Building off of Williams' concerns and the material of the collection, I and my students have developed an exhibit concerning the urban 'flâneur' and are developing *Regarding Wealth* for the Legacy Gallery and an installation at ACCESS health

<sup>5</sup> This project was much enriched by the comments and suggestions of students of HA 490/590/690 seminars of the 2008–2009 academic year: Eric Anderson, Magdalyn Asimaskis, Veronica Best, Heather Crowley, Melba Dalsin, Kim Drabek, Susan Hawkins, Mathew McKay, Andrea Porritt, Kaitlyn Patience, Mike Quan, Cassidy Richardson, Jysicca Richardson, Aleta Salmon, Nancy Schnarr, Julia Simpson, Filiz Tutuncu, Chang Won, and Christine Woychesko. As did the students from HA 583 and HA 493 of the 2009–2010 academic year: Magdalyn Asimaskis, Jennifer Cador, Sara Checkley, Gareth Clayton, Jamie Clifton, Heather Dixon, Laura Hayward, Julia Hulbert, Stephanie Korn, Katie Lemmon, Toby Lawrence, Elyse Longair, Kathleen Prince, Katy Scoones, Leah Taylor, and Holly Unsworth.

During the fall 2008 seminar, Susan Hawkins also explored the issue of homelessness with respect to the Williams Collection, though from a different perspective.

I owe a special thanks to my research assistant Tusa Shea for conducting some of the background research for *Regarding Wealth*.

<sup>6</sup> City of Victoria. 2009. *Connect Newsletter*, Spring, 1.

that concern urban poverty. The collection and its cultural source, then, can provide clues to suggest points of fruitful critical engagement for curating and teaching. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, in reality, as third party institutional actors we cannot truly preserve the intangible; instead, we can create metaculture. The multiple forms of community engagement with which The University of Victoria's Williams Bequest is bestowed (patronage, education, and research) indexes the reality that heritage, both its tangible and intangible properties, managed by institutions produces new entities – metacultures.

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