
The Office of Curator of the House of Commons

by Kim Thalheimer

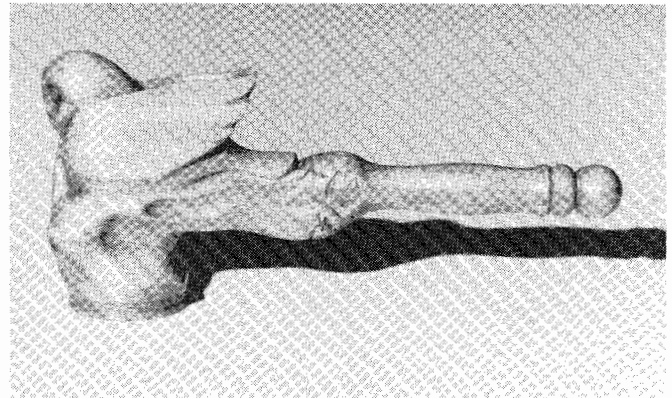
Did you know there used to be a saloon in the basement of the Centre Block before the fire of 1916 or that MPs used to be able to choose how hard their chair would be? Probably not, since the history of the art, artifacts and architecture on Parliament Hill may be one of the nation's best kept secrets.

In 1977 Ian Watson introduced a private member's bill to establish a Parliament Hill Curator. "I came to think about such a bill because of an incident which occurred in the House (in 1975) when I sought information from those people responsible for removing the glass windows in the House when it became necessary to replace them by these beautiful coloured windows," Watson said. "The removal of those leaded windows was done quite simply — they used a sledge hammer to smash them off and not a single piece of those historic windows was salvaged." Watson's private bill never came to pass but finally Parliament has its first curator.

Stephen Delroy was hired in February 1989. His official title is Curator of the House of Commons Collection but his duties extend to most of Parliament Hill, except the Senate. Before Delroy was hired, no one person was designated to restore and conserve the pieces although some curatorial duties were done by Parliamentary Library staff.

Delroy has an undergraduate degree in anthropology at Carleton University and a masters of philosophy in social anthropology. He was employed by the Museum of Civilization for more than seven years as an archivist, cataloguer and curator. Later he worked for the Canadian Heritage Information Network — a computer network of Canadian and international museums — as the chief of consulting and research.

One of his first projects in his new position was the restoration of two old wooden phone booths that belonged to the House but were found in a Public Works



A unique artifact: the gavel for the new Cabinet room in the Centre Block carved by Christopher Fairbrother

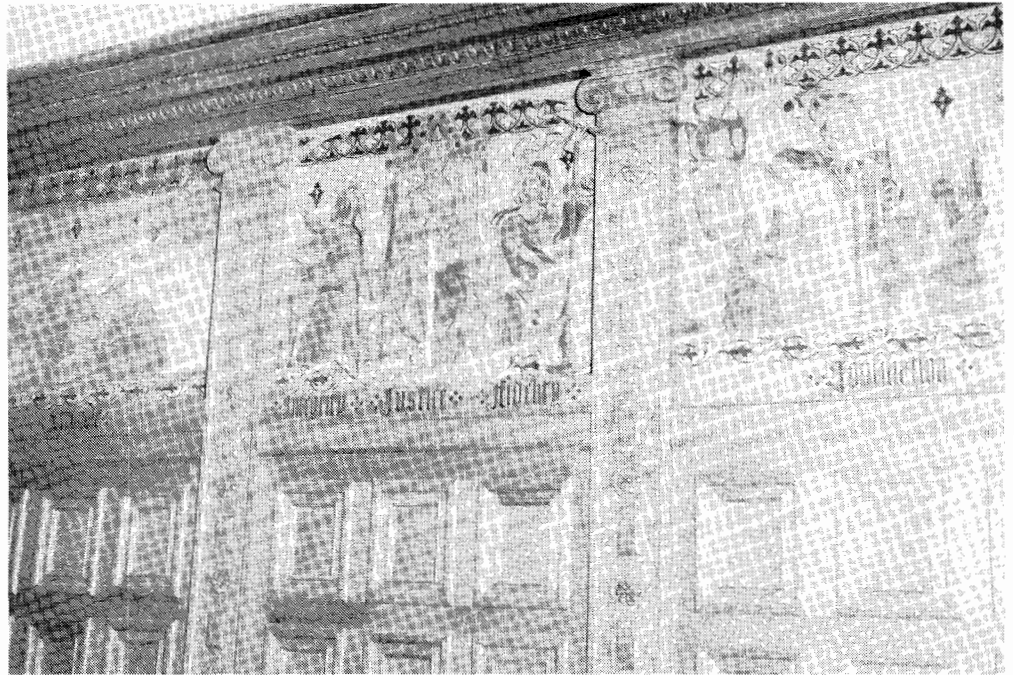
warehouse. "It took three months to refinish them," Delroy says as he runs his hand over the wood finish and turns the brass handle of the glass doors. "We're trying hard to find out how old they are. Maybe 60 years." In the absence of any documents that revealed their original location they were set up in the East Block. Working telephones will be installed in them soon.

The Curator's job is to make sure Parliament Hill's art pieces and historical furniture remain for other generations to see and learn about. A major task is to take inventory. "The idea is to find out what pieces are out there and where they are, count them and see if they're falling apart." He hopes to have that done by next year and to have a catalogue with photographs and short descriptions of the pieces done in the next three years.

Part of Delroy's job is to answer questions from MPs and the public concerning art, artifacts and architectural details found on the Hill. Delroy hopes he'll be able to provide the information to anyone who wants it through the catalogue. "It's not the kind of thing you can take a half hour to find out. It takes time," he says. "One of the things that surprised me was that there was no documentation of the works. A lot of our time and money is spent just trying to gather information about the pieces."

Kim Thalheimer is a graduate of Carleton University's School of Journalism.

A mural found in the office of the Leader of the Official Opposition



Because many of the pieces are unsigned, Delroy and his staff often have to sift through government archives, old administration files or architectural plans to find out who was commissioned to do the work and when it was done. Delroy has two people working for him, a reference document curator and a curatorial assistant. "Sometimes we also have to read debates, committee reports or interview previous staff members of Public Works Canada to find out why something was done." Delroy says they also try to interview the artist or the artist's family to find out the meaning behind the pieces.

"We're also trying to put together a series of photographs of the artists and their work. You see the work that's there but you don't see who did it. Some artists used their friends or relatives as models and we have photographs of the model standing next to the piece."

Another part of the job is to find missing artifacts made on Parliament Hill or associated with it. "I'm having a hard time finding spittoons. Eventually ashtrays will be the same, they're going to disappear." Spittoons are among the artifacts displayed in the historic rooms of the East Block. "They are authentic but they're just not the actual ones used in that specific room. For example, an ink stand would match something in a photograph but it's not the exact ink stand that was there a hundred years ago." Delroy is also trying to find paintings or drawings of the Centre Block's saloon. Parliament Hill has roughly 1,000 to 2,000 paintings, worth about \$50,000 each. Most of the paintings are hanging but some are in storage. Many of the carvings, Delroy says, are worth as much as

the paintings. "These works of art should be visible because they have a purpose," Delroy says. "The painting of an MP, for example, would be like painting a debate or painting that person's role in the governing process."

Parliament Hill is not a museum and we can't treat it as one. The historical furniture has to be used and the art pieces can't be protected like they are in a gallery. But we should take care of them and conserve them because there's an awful lot of history here and it shouldn't be lost.

One of the biggest problems is trying to sort out whether an item belongs to the House or to political parties. "Because they (art and artifacts) have been around for so many years, nobody knows who they belong to." Once it's determined that an item belongs to the House then the Curator can decide to have it restored. If they belong to political parties he does not have jurisdiction over the pieces.

Another problem is to correctly interpret an artist's work for documentation. "We try to interpret the works and come up with the concept behind them based on the sources we have," Delroy says. "I think with the catalogue we're putting together, it's necessary to tell people as much as we know and take the risk of being shown to be wrong." He says there are times when it's



Fernand Rossignol carves a panel from the "History of Canada" series

impossible to be absolutely sure who did the work but an educated guess can be made by studying its particular style.

Architecture does not fall under the jurisdiction of the Curator. Although part of his job is to compile a history behind a building's architectural details, he says Public Works Canada is in charge of determining what the buildings look like and what they are used for.

During the 1960s the interior of the West Block was redesigned to look like a regular office building. "They didn't restore any of its old charm," Delroy says. "They destroyed the place." A heritage committee to advise on renovations and decide what's in keeping with the style of the buildings was set up after the horror of the West Block to make sure it does not happen again.

Commissioning works of art does not fall under the jurisdiction of the curator. At present some work, like the stone carvings and statues, is commissioned by Public Works Canada while other pieces, such as the paintings of the speakers, are commissioned by the House of Commons. Parliament Hill has one sculptress and one stone carver on staff.

You need artifacts and art on Parliament Hill almost for the same reason you need Parliament Hill. They are made for the purpose of representing tradition and the reality of parliament as it works.

Perhaps the touchiest part for a curator of a legislature is public access. People associate these art pieces with the history of Canada, and recognize them as visual displays of the country's heritage. More than a half-million people come every year to visit Parliament Hill. Canadians take

pride in this institution and they go away feeling patriotic after seeing the buildings and its art.

"Parliament's first function is not art and architecture but to govern the country. Everything else is secondary. But on the other hand, life would be awfully dull if we did everything on a functional level," Delroy says as he walks past the sculpted face of an MP sleeping during a debate.

What is the Curator's favourite piece of art on the Hill? It is the 120 feet of bas-relief panels carved in the foyer of the Centre Block. "Carved into it is the history of Canada, from the discovery all the way through the opening of the West and the beginning of the institution of banking. It took eight to 10 years to finish and it was carved right where it is."

One can not really put a price on the worth of such objects. The ceiling of the House of Commons Chamber is worth an estimated \$10 million but in reality it's priceless since it would be too difficult to reproduce. Most of the techniques used on the ceiling just are not being used anymore.

The office of Parliament Hill's Curator is a permanent one paid for by the House of Commons but no separate budget is set aside to run the office. "In the first year, it's hard to say how much it will cost us to run the place," Delroy says. The budget for the office would also include the conservation and restoration of the objects. Public Works Canada spent roughly \$2 million last year on the restoration and conservation of the statues outside. "We don't have an acquisition budget right now, but maybe we'll eventually have one. If I find an art piece or artifact that used to be on Parliament Hill but is owned privately, I hope for a donation." For the moment he is not focusing on collecting art but documenting what is available and what it means to the country.