

HERbarium: Untold Stories of Early Canadian Women Scientists*

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Summary *HERbarium* is a public exhibition exploring the pioneering work of five Canadian women who did world-class science despite severe cultural and institutional gender-based discrimination. Through this historical analysis, we hope to contribute to contemporary discussions on how equity brings about higher quality and more diverse scientific outcomes.

1. Relevance

Discrimination based on the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, dis/ability, and class steers many away from entering scientific fields, and continues to affect the lives and careers of those who choose to pursue science. It is important to understand the historical roots and scope of discrimination so culturally aware counter-strategies can be devised and effectively implemented.

2. Aims & Objectives

Our goal was to document the scientific output, careers, and lives of early women natural scientists in Canada (pre-1940s), and to curate a public exhibition informed by our findings. By shining a light on early Canadian history, we hoped to offer insight into the foundations of the enduring equity issues faced today in the sciences.

3. Methods

The project was an experiment conceived of as part of a 4th year multi-disciplinary seminar class “Representations of Women’s Scientific Contributions” taught by historian of science and gender relations Dr. Cindy Stelmackowich through the Pauline Jewett Institute for Women’s and Gender Studies at Carleton University in collaboration with the Carleton University Art Gallery (CUAG). Classroom subjects were coupled with trips to the non-public collections of various Canadian national museums and archives, where subject matter experts were consulted, and artifacts were examined and analyzed. Based on the available material, a structure was chosen for the exhibit to use compelling artifacts to showcase the work and lives of five women whose scientific contributions had lasting global impacts, and illustrate the effect institutionalized discrimination had on their potential.

4. Results

The exhibition opened at CUAG on September 11, 2017. It featured many artifacts that had never before been seen by the public, and showcased several women not known outside of their respective scientific fields. Preliminary feedback indicates that we achieved our goal of providing a cohesive and compelling historical account that is relevant to discourses around equity today. It will run until December 3, 2017 at CUAG and will inform a larger 2018 national exhibition on Canadian women in science at the Canadian Museum of Nature.

5. Conclusions

That a modest exhibit such as *HERbarium* was able to present so much new material stresses the need for continued historical scholarship in the areas of gender and science. The project exposes gender biases in both policies and social attitudes, and brings to light a few of the many untold stories of women who have made significant contributions to science.

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