



**HUMANITIES RESEARCH CENTRE**  
in the **RESEARCH SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES**

***Embodiment, Irony and the Aboriginal Curio: Towards a Typology  
of Military Collecting in 18th Century North America***

**PROFESSOR RUTH B. PHILLIPS**

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RSH Visiting Fellow

**Tuesday, 15 May, 2007 at 4.00pm**  
**Theatrette, Old Canberra House, ANU**

This talk explores the ways in which 18th-century military collections can be read as evidence of the inter-cultural dynamics of the era. Officers and soldiers serving in the vast armies sent to North America between 1750 and 1820 are responsible for the earliest documentable collections from the region. I argue that the specific circumstances of individual military collector's interactions with Aboriginal people, in combination with aspects of character and intellectual formation, resulted in two very different modes of collecting. Drawing on the material qualities of extant collections, collection histories, and 18th century texts by novelist Charlotte Smith and fur trader Alexander Henry, I attempt an initial typology of the 18th century soldier-collector. It distinguishes, on the one hand, the mode of the curiosity collector, for whom each item retains its sense of separation from the others. Whether the curio engenders a response of admiration or repulsion, it remains distanced - often ironically - from its original Aboriginal context of making and use. The second mode is associated with embodied and participatory episodes of ritual adoption which were required by Aboriginal diplomacy and which caused soldier-collectors to enter much more fully - if only briefly and with a partial understanding - into the Great Lakes Aboriginal mode of being in the world.

**Biographical information**

Ruth B. Phillips is Canada Research Chair and Professor of Art History at Carleton University, Ottawa. Her fields of research are the art history of the Aboriginal peoples of northeastern North America and the history and theory of museums. She is currently directing the Great Lakes Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts and Cultures (GRASAC), a major international research collaboration which is creating an innovative multimedia and multivocal digital research resource.

Phillips is the author of *Representing Woman: Sande Masquerades of the Mende of Sierra Leone* (1995), *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast* (1998), and *Native North American Art* (1998), co-authored with Janet Catherine Berlo. She also co-edited *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds* with Christopher B. Steiner (1999), and *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums, and Material Culture* (forthcoming 2006) with Elizabeth Edwards and Chris Gosden. From 1997-2003 Phillips served as director of the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology.

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