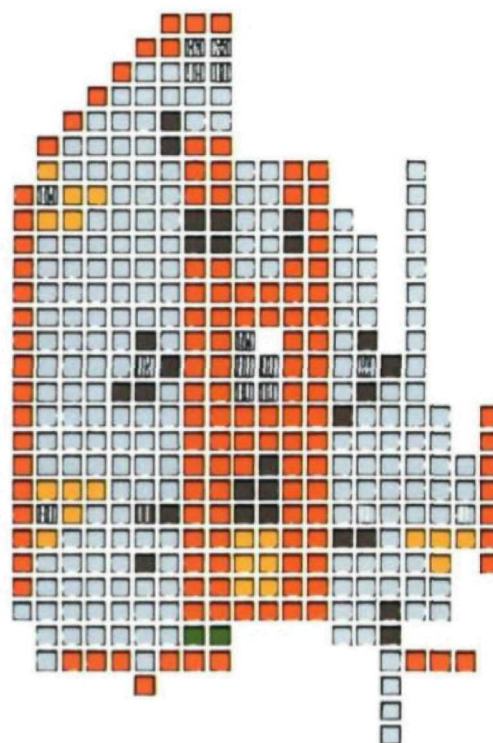
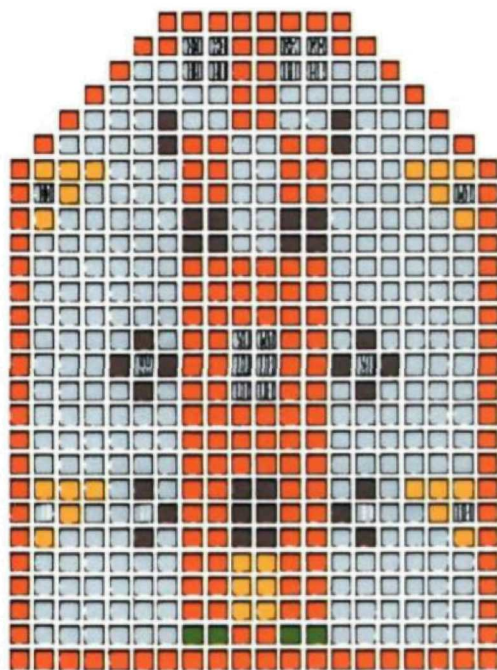

Art and Archaeology at York Factory

By Gary Adams



IT SEEMS that throughout its ample history people have always had a tendency to describe York Factory in strong terms. In 1841 Robert Ballantyne called it 'a monstrous blot on a swampy spot, with a partial view of the frozen sea!' In 1916 J. B. Tyrrell used similar language and described it as 'one continuous swamp covered with a thick, water-soaked blanket of bog mosses'. Descriptions such as these were none too harsh; for even today York Factory is singularly impressive in the adverseness of its environment.

The summers in the Hudson Bay Lowlands are short and wet by Western Canadian standards with a few hot days in July and August that bring forth the biting mosquitoes, black flies, bulldogs and midges in their teeming millions. September on that flat, water-soaked piece of land is an alternation of crisp, warm autumn days with cold, foggy ones. Winter sets in

early on the coast and persists for long unendurable months until the first spring days in May or June. When one thinks about the cold, the fog, the sodden ground, the icy winds or the mosquitoes, it becomes very difficult to visualize living in that kind of environment. Yet people did.

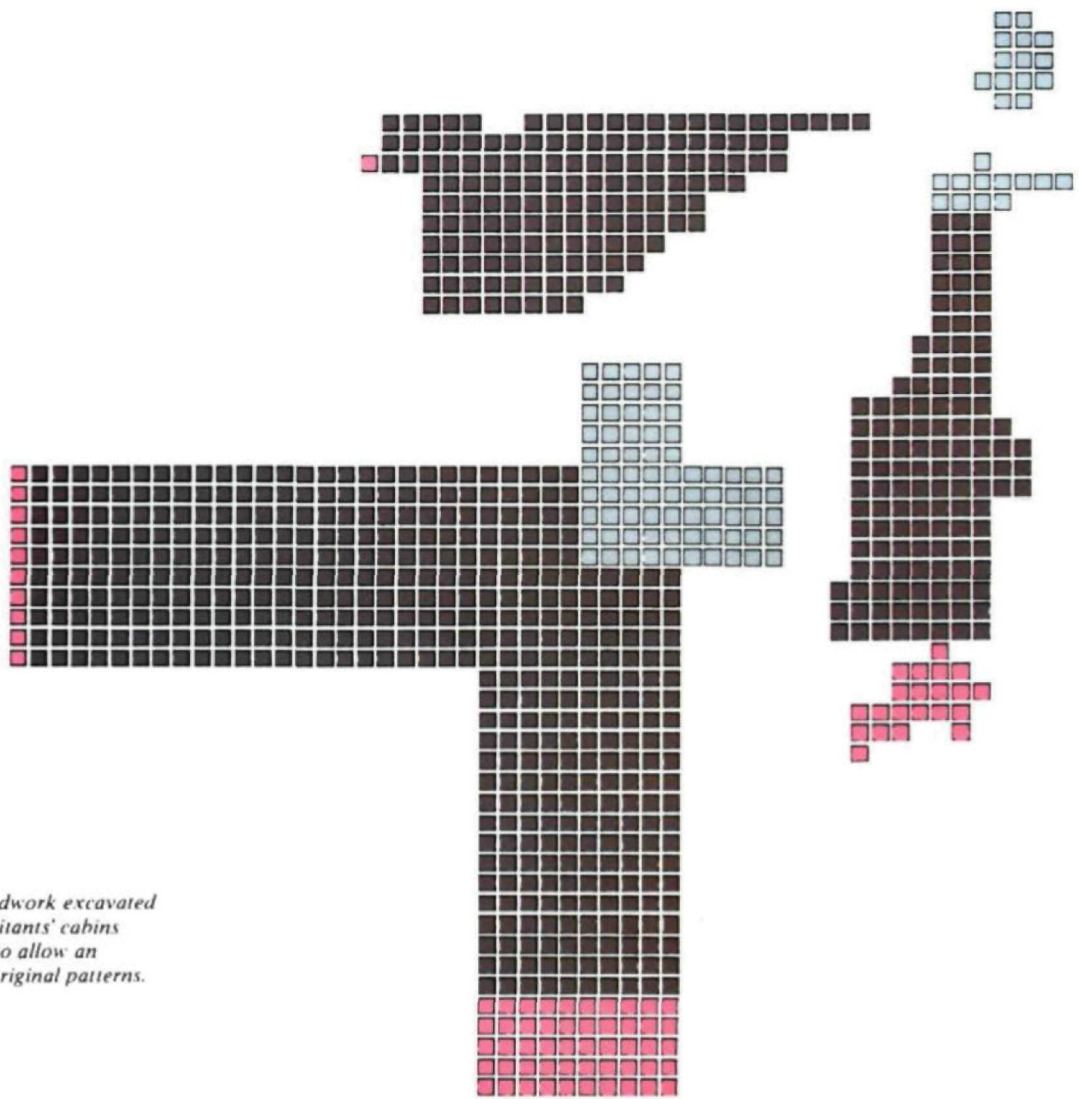
The Hudson's Bay Company has had posts in the area of York Factory since 1682. Their operations there finally closed in 1957 after two hundred and seventy-five years of activity, with a population that ranged from a half dozen to over five hundred individuals including the local native population. Throughout this entire period the inhabitants suffered the ravages of nature with far less defence than we have today.

Now, York Factory is undergoing a revitalization of sorts. The ruins of the last occupation from 1789 to 1957 are being challenged by the elements and are losing the battle. Riverbank erosion is progressing at a rate of something over a half metre per year. To counteract this devastation, Parks Canada has been sending in an archaeological crew for the past four years to excavate those areas in the greatest danger.

To date, this crew has been exploring a number of

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Two fragments of beadwork excavated from one of the inhabitants' cabins are complete enough to allow an interpretation of the original patterns.

diverse areas including a saw-pit where logs were hand-sawn into planks; an ice-house where meat was kept frozen all summer; a storage house for dog meat; a pier used in the latter decades of the site's occupation and a cabin of one of the local inhabitants. Throughout this exercise, various artifacts have been revealed that attest to the harsh life-style of the York Factory inhabitants. Hand-forged nails and hand-constructed tools; gun, trap and harpoon parts; fragments of coarse woollen cloth; parts of wooden barrels, glass bottles and ceramic crocks for putting up and storing food against hard times; Carron stove parts and cast-iron pots all give a uniform impression of the life-style. On occasion however, artifacts turn up that both astound and impress the excavators. These artifacts represent the arts and handicrafts of a fur-trade settlement.

Whether it was in spite of the harsh conditions, because of those conditions or just man's natural inclination to express himself, art was certainly alive and well at York Factory. It is perhaps an irony that those very conditions of cold and wet which spawned the art have acted upon its remains to preserve traces for all of us to witness. While the remains are scanty,

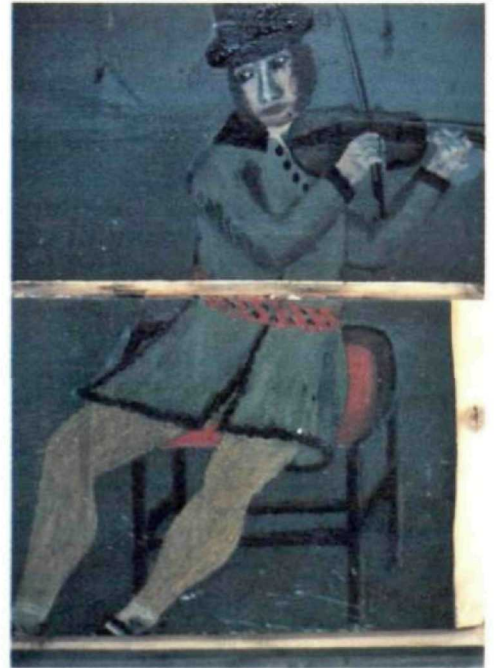
they are nevertheless preserved and brought forward by the archaeologist's trowel. It is in this article that we would like to present a *première* of the art of York Factory.

Perhaps the most common expression is in the decorative art field. Already, several pieces of such art have come to light.

Beadwork was always a favourite decorative form of the local inhabitants and beads have been found by the thousands during the course of excavation at York Factory. Occasionally these random beads have been supplemented by a real treasure — fragments of beadwork still in their original configuration. A total of six such finds has already been excavated, two of which have been reconstructed. The problem with these has been that although the beads are still in place, all the connecting threads and material have decomposed so that each bead must be carefully removed and recorded in relation to its neighbours.

Excavations at one of the inhabitants' cabins have yielded two fine examples of the beadwork which remain sufficiently intact to allow a reconstruction. The first of these objects appears to be a decoration

Several panels, probably painted by an artistically inclined individual in the late eighteenth century, were recently discovered as shelving at York Factory.



Scenes on a fragment of birch-bark eroded from the riverbank at York Factory.



for a moccasin vamp. The overall size is twenty-six beads long and twenty beads wide with one squared end, while the other end comes almost to a point. It contains six different kinds of seed beads including clear round and red, clear, orange, blue and green faceted. While a certain portion of the network was damaged in excavation and displaced by ground disturbances, there is still enough of it left intact to allow an interpretation of its original pattern. The figure (Page 38) shows the shape of the recorded pattern and one hypothesized interpretation of how it might have looked.

The second object has the appearance of a portion of a geometric design that may have been added to other pieces to form a larger pattern. Some possible applications of this form of beadwork would have been on jackets, moccasin uppers, tote bags or shirts. A portion of the centre of this particular network was sliced off in excavation and all the ends were partially disturbed or frayed in use. Only three types of beads were sewn into this pattern: blue, pink and white faceted. However, like the preceding example there was enough of this particular sample surviving to allow us to interpret a completed object (Page 39).

Decoration was not limited to beadwork at York Factory, and a few essentially utilitarian items displayed the handiwork of the tradesmen who worked in that isolated outpost. One must remember that York Factory was always a major site and that during its peak years as a depot, a number of tradesmen and artisans were gainfully employed producing material for both the trade and the settlement. Shipwrights built sloops and York boats; carpenters built and repaired buildings and furniture; a blacksmith supplied most of the metal hardware needs; a cooper worked much of his time constructing barrels and kegs; a tinsmith formed pots, pans and household items; and a tailor made and repaired clothing.

These workers and their counterparts in other trades were probably most concerned with utilitarian wares and items of solid, functional design. This, in any event, is what the archaeology suggests. Yet every once in a while, whether it was for diversion, special commission or out of sheer boredom, a workman would add a touch of himself to his work to create something pleasing to the eye.

Perhaps the most common expressions of such labour are found in the work of the carpenter and blacksmith. The most obvious examples of the carpenter's art are found in the depot itself. This one structure, started in 1831, took four years to complete. While its original purpose was for storerooms, packing rooms and warehousing, it still contained some remarkable instances of wood-working. In some of the rooms, exposed beams were bevelled along the edges and finished on the ends.

Banisters were finished with knobs and the front doors were panelled. In one or two rooms, every wall plank was edged with a narrow roll to create a different visual effect from the remainder of the building.

Archaeologically, the best example of the woodworker's trade is a small, wooden bowl. This bowl was probably turned on a lathe and as it is of spruce



Part of a small spruce-wood bowl, probably turned on a lathe, hand-decorated and painted.

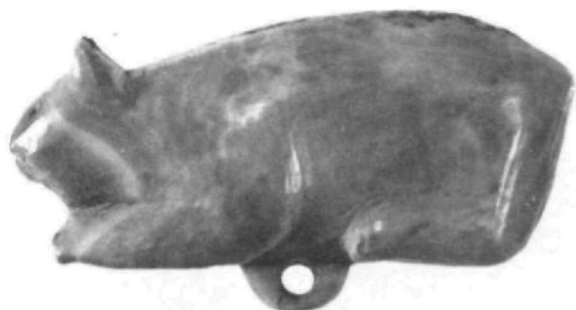
wood, it was likely done locally. What makes it exceptional is the fact that the entire outside was decorated with hand-cut geometric motifs that were of a style commonly seen in the native art of the area. The patterns were probably painted also; faint impressions of blue and red paint are still observable on the surfaces of the bowl.

The art of the blacksmith was most often seen in the handiwork on the door hardware. Door handles, latches, shutterdogs and escutcheons were often decorated with incised geometric patterns or with plates of metal cut to form starbursts, French curls or shield-like designs.

Along with decorative techniques, archaeology has also recovered a few examples of fine art. Excavation at the storage house for dog meat brought forth a tiny, carved animal figurine. It is 38 mm long and carved out of a piece of sea-mammal ivory in the form of a crouching animal. The crouching position and sharp ears suggest that it is a representation of a lynx, but it is stylized enough to be hotly debated by a number of people who see it as a bear or a dog. It has a shank eye on the base which indicates that it was intended to be attached to something else.

Another piece of art was found on a fragment of birch-bark that had eroded out of the riverbank. The fragment showed evidence of having been cut on two

sides and the shorter of these sides still bore holes from having been sewn to another piece of bark. On one face of this fragment two partial scenes were found, inscribed into the bark with a pointed instrument. The lower of these scenes indicates two human figures, one on each side of a triangular object that may represent a tepee. A vertical, snake-like line



Carved ivory figure, possibly a lynx, 38 mm long.

in the centre of this tepee may indicate a column of smoke. The second scene shows two human figures standing in a boat. One of these humans holds a round object like a drum, stretched hide, or shield, while the second figure is characterized with something that resembles a bib.

The bark fragment itself was suggestive of the sacred scrolls of the Ojibway Indians. These scrolls were made and used as religious and historical documents of that tribe but a close comparison with the motifs of several known scrolls revealed that there was no similarity in artistic style or content.

Perhaps the most significant piece of art to be discovered at York Factory did not come from archaeological sources at all. This piece is a series of paintings displayed as wall murals on wooden panels. These panels, at some point in the past, were ripped up, turned over, and reused as shelving. The remaining portions were discovered a number of years ago and were recently removed from the site for conservation purposes.

There were originally two sets of panels, each with a number of scenes painted in what appears to be an oil paint. The first set is composed of four panels and contains two scenes. The first scene is a red-jacketed hunter with a musket who is in the process of shooting two geese over a swamp. This scene is probably very

typical of sporting activity at York Factory as was attested to by Ballantyne, among others. The second scene is a caricature of a gentleman (possibly the factor) and his wife at tea. While the white-haired gentleman in coat and vest enjoys his pipe with beer and port, the lady takes tea from a silver samovar. The lady has her red dress covered in an apron and her head is covered with a bonnet. The most interesting aspect of her appearance though, is the dancing fox that stands on her shoulder. Perhaps some inside joke about the Company was at play here.

The second set of panels probably had at least three boards at one time but much of this has been lost. What is left is the impression of a large dance scene with a fiddler at each end and a dancing couple in the centre. It is this couple that is most intriguing. He is buck-toothed and dressed to the hilt in a coat and high collar. His hair is braided and he holds out his bejewelled pinkie with much gallantry to a ridiculous looking lady with a feathered hat and monstrous earrings.

All these scenes were probably caricatures of persons and events that were familiar to some artistically inclined individual at York Factory. The artist is not known but the buckle shoes and clothing styles suggest a late eighteenth-century time period at the latest. That someone took offence to these renditions is evident in their subsequent mistreatment which, by a twist of fate, is probably the very reason that they are preserved to this day. Although the actual paints have not yet been analysed, the artist apparently made do with available materials. The black pigment has an unusual texture that may mean some form of blacking material. Also, to represent the lacy texture of the apron of the seated lady, the artist used a form of finger-paint technique.

The dance scene in the painting has led into the last form of art that has been recovered in excavation at York Factory. However, in this case, it is restricted to the evidence of another art — music. One cannot hear the painted fiddler any more than one can hear the music from a rusted instrument but the implication is certainly there and it is found in abundance. As well as forty-three phonograph record parts, a total of fifteen Jew's harps and nine harmonicas and pitch pipes have been found. This also says nothing about the washboards, saws, jugs, or anvils that might have been gathered up on a raucous Saturday night.

Indeed, the life-style was harsh, bleak and lonely at York Factory but the human spirit was probably never daunted by such trivialities. A sense of beauty or a sense of fun and even the two in combination permitted, or perhaps encouraged, the artistic expression of many an individual at York Factory. Today archaeological techniques are adding a new dimension to that expression. ♦