

MOULDING AN INDUSTRY: EXPLORING THE 1946 DESIGN IN INDUSTRY EXHIBITION

ROSALIND SWEENEY-MCCABE, MASTER'S STUDENT, ART HISTORY & VISUAL CULTURE

Rosalind Sweeney-McCabe (she/her) is a graduate student in the Department of Art History and Visual Culture. Her research is focused on industrial design in Canada in the post-war period. She is a recipient of a Canada Graduate Research Scholarship (SSHRC). Since May 2024, Rosalind has worked as a Graduate Student Research Assistant on the [xDX Project](#), using Linked Open Data to create a fit-to-purpose resource for design researchers and historians.

Tell us about your professional experiences before starting your current studies.

I graduated with my undergraduate degree in Art History from McGill in 2020. I worked for the McGill Visual Arts Collection throughout my degree and completed a summer internship for the Royal Ontario Museum's Canadian Collection in 2019. Before the COVID pandemic broke out, my post-graduation plans included an internship at a museum or gallery and going from there. This plan was upended by the pandemic as most internship programs were suspended, so I began a series of jobs outside of the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (GLAM) field.

Eventually, I found a job doing research, copywriting, and strategy for a branding (graphic design and marketing) studio. I worked in this position for a while but eventually wanted my research and writing to serve a purpose beyond commodification— so I decided to apply for my Master's degree.

Tell us about your MRP and how it relates to the study of Canada.

My MRP investigates how the [Design in Industry](#) exhibition, held at the National

Gallery in 1946 and travelling across Canada from 1947 to 1950, shifted the framing of industrial design in Canada. I am interested in how this exhibition worked to get industry and policymakers to conceptualize industrial design as part of a prosperous future for Canada, which led to their support for further initiatives to foster the industry.

Following World War II, the House of Commons Special Committee on Reconstruction and Reestablishment identified industrial design as a means to retain the expanded manufacturing capacity boosted during the war, while utilizing techniques and materials innovated during wartime production. One of the first outcomes from these findings was the *Design in Industry* exhibition, which would be co-sponsored by the National Gallery, National Film Board (NFB), and the National Research Council. My MRP draws on archival documentation and ephemera from this exhibition to examine how *Design in Industry* went about selling the industrial design industry to its audience of politicians, manufacturers, and the Canadian public.

What inspired you to do this work?

Coming into my MA at York, I knew I wanted to research something around the National

Industrial Design Committee (NIDC). Founded in 1948, the NIDC would become a federal body (under shifting departments/portfolios) dedicated to the promotion of industrial design in Canada. I minored in political science as an undergraduate student, and I have always been intrigued by political history. I am drawn to industrial design history because, for me, it is an area where political and economic policies/histories interact with aesthetic sensibilities and outcomes. To me, the NIDC was a clear example of this as modern design was exclusively promoted throughout the committee's tenure.

Throughout the first year of my MA, I worked with my supervisor, Prof. Jan Hadlaw, to narrow down the scope of my MRP. This consisted of finding an understudied event in Canadian design history that I was interested in and one that had enough of an archival trace for me to form a coherent picture/understanding of.

After visiting the archives at the National Gallery and Library and Archives Canada, and reading through secondary sources during Summer 2025, I came away with a few exhibitions that I could imagine writing an MRP about. Of those, I felt most drawn to *Design in Industry* because, I believe, it led to - or helped to create - a successful case for establishing the NIDC.

What are the main takeaways of your work?

1. *Design in Industry* was a catalyst for further investment from both government and the manufacturing industry in Canada's industrial design sector.
2. The push for fostering Industrial Design was happening with most of Canada's main trading partners following World War II, notably the UK

and the USA. Canada's pursuit of building this industry was both related to and distinct from American and British efforts— this was evident as early as the *Design in Industry* exhibition.

3. Museums and cultural institutions played a large role in imagining and communicating a post-WWII Canada.

Tell us about the challenges you experienced when doing this work.

At the micro-level, one of the hardest parts of my work so far has been dealing with conflicting information from primary sources for certain baseline information that I assumed to be objective (fixed within records), such as dates and people's roles in various departments at different times. Such facts are slipperier than I imagined within primary source documents. To deal with this and to build an account I'm confident in, I consulted the widest breadth of primary sources that I could. While there is no "silver bullet" source, covering as much ground possible has given me more comfort in building my own account of events.

On the macro-level, it has been a challenge to keep my scope focused, as there is so much, I find interesting and, at the same time, distracting as I complete my research.

What do you enjoy the most about your work?

I love the feeling of being immersed in the period I am studying; the various collaborators on the *Design in Industry* exhibition have become almost familiar to me.

Also, in our current moment of economic uncertainty - where, in Canada, we are thinking about our internal manufacturing

landscape/capabilities - the parallels to my era of focus add another layer of interest for me.

What advice, lessons, or tips do you have for those starting their academic journey?

Get to your relevant archives as soon as possible. Once you're there, take detailed notes and photographs of everything.

What are the next steps in your research?

Writing, reading, and editing.