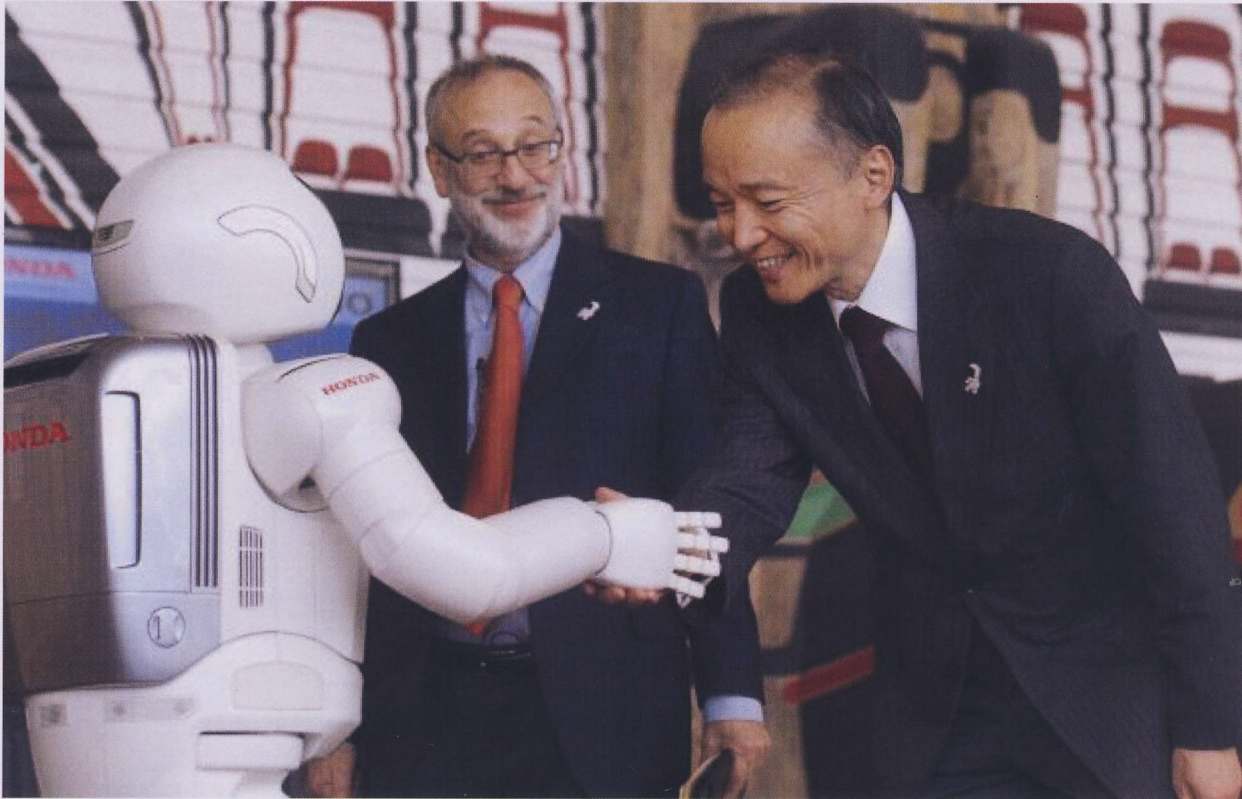


These robots will knock your socks off

Victor Rabinovitch is retiring today as head of two of the capital's most important museums. But his legacy will carry on, as witnessed in a new show about Japan.

BY PAUL GESSELL, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 21, 2011



Japanese ambassador to Canada Kaoru Ishikawa is greeted by ASIMO, the Honda robot, while Victor Rabinovitch looks on during the media preview for the Museum of Civilization's latest exhibit, Japan Tradition-Innovation in Gatineau, Quebec, on May 20, 2011.

Photograph by: Wayne Cuddington, The Ottawa Citizen

For the past 11 years, he has repeatedly shown us the wonders of the ancient world — Greece, Afghanistan, Jordan and Egypt — spread out before us like the loot in Ali Baba's cave.

In 2005, on the 50th anniversary of V.E. Day, as flag-waving veterans rode army tanks down Wellington Street, he opened a new war museum in the shadow of Parliament Hill and not, as the politicians and bureaucrats initially wanted, in some distant suburb.

And now Victor Rabinovitch is leaving, not quietly, but with a bang.

Rabinovitch begins retirement today after more than a decade as the president of the Canadian Museum of Civilization and its subsidiary, the Canadian War Museum. His goodbye gift is an exhibition opening this weekend at Civilization that contrasts the culture of ancient and contemporary Japan. The robots alone will knock your socks off.

The exhibition is titled Japan: Tradition. Innovation. It compares contemporary Japanese design with historical artifacts from the Edo Period (1603 to 1867). We see how traditional influences in craftsmanship and technology have shaped modern Japan and popular culture in the rest of the world, including Canada, with everything from transistor radios and Walkmans to Honda Civics.

Painted, decorative screens hundreds of years old inspire today's animation artists in Japan. Robots trace their ancestry back 300 years to the days of mechanized dolls. Twenty-first century textiles, ceramics and children's games in Japan are rooted in ancient products.

The exhibition was nine years in the making, a project born of curiosity, co-operation and perseverance. Even the March 11 earthquake in Japan could not stop it; Ambassador Kaoru Ishikawa personally made sure that museums in his devastated country would honour agreements to lend promised artifacts. In the end, it's symbolic of what Rabinovitch has tried to do during the past decade at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

One of the hallmarks of Rabinovitch's reign has been his focus on making the museum truly international by negotiating bilateral agreements with museums in other countries to exchange exhibitions. Such deals have been reached with the likes of China, Mexico, Russia, Greece and, of course Japan, where the National Museum of Japanese History in Sakura helped Civilization curator Alan Elder create this show.

Those international agreements have allowed Rabinovitch and his team to drive shopping carts through some of the most exotic museums of the world to borrow artifacts for exhibitions in Gatineau. In exchange, Rabinovitch has assembled travelling exhibitions of Canadian art and artifacts, usually aboriginal in nature. Much of the world is particularly fascinated with Canada's Inuit, their art and the story of their survival in the Far North.

When Rabinovitch first came to Civilization, the institution was pejoratively nicknamed Disneyland North. The emphasis was on kid-friendly, whiz-bang technology to tell a story. Rabinovitch put the emphasis back on artifacts, the actual objects handled by explorers or scientists or pharaohs.

There was also a failure at the museum a decade ago to confront some of the messier aspects of Canadian history. Example: A small permanent exhibition on the history of the Acadians neglected to mention the British expelled them from Canada in 1755.

"There wasn't the substance to complement the beauty of the presentation," Rabinovitch reminisced in a recent pre-retirement interview.

Consequently, shortly after becoming president, Rabinovitch marched into a meeting of the board of trustees and said: "We've got to stop ducking." The permanent exhibitions at Civilization were retooled in subsequent years to provide more context, to tell all sides of sometimes painful stories.

It was not all smooth sailing for Rabinovitch.

Politicians leaned on him at times, rather spectacularly in 2001, when the museum cancelled an exhibition of Arab-Canadian art, fearing emotions were too volatile after the 9-11 terrorist attacks. All parties in Parliament demanded the show go on.

Parliamentarians pressured Rabinovitch again shortly after the new war museum opened, complaining an exhibition about Bomber Command made Canada's Second World War airmen look like war criminals for bombing civilians. The exhibition text panels were changed.

As Rabinovitch leaves — he turns 65 on Sunday — he has some advice for the politicians. Essentially, he wants the current belt-tightening Conservative government to realize there are limits to what cultural institutions can squeeze out of the private sector in the national capital area.

All philanthropy, like all politics, is local, says Rabinovitch, and there not enough "local" corporations in the Ottawa-Gatineau area to fund all national cultural institutions in a big way.

"What would make me uncomfortable would be if you think there is a magic bullet for funding." Government still has to provide the bulk of funds for national institutions in the capital, he says.

Rabinovitch will continue to expound on Canadian culture long after he leaves Civilization. He plans next year to start teaching a class in cultural policy at Queen's University in Kingston.

David Loye, the museum's chief operating officer, will replace Rabinovitch until a successor is named.

Japan: Tradition. Innovation

When & where: Until Oct. 10 at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, 100 rue Laurier in Gatineau

Information: www.civilization.ca or call 819-776-7000

© Copyright (c) The Ottawa Citizen

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)