Between 1913 and 1970, the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) produced an annual calendar which it distributed free of charge through its department stores, fur trade posts, and various administrative offices. While quantities varied from year to year, on average the HBC sent out one hundred thousand of these calendars on an annual basis. Calendars, of course, are not unique to the Hudson's Bay Company. Mass-produced calendars first appeared in the United States in the middle part of the nineteenth century, and with advances in the printing trade and distribution networks, they quickly became popular tools in the advertising industry.

Now catalogued in the Hudson's Bay Company Archives Documentary Art Collection, the Company calendar is a popular and often-used visual resource. This thesis undertakes an archival analysis of the HBC's calendars by examining the functional context of their creation. In recent years, archivists have been exploring various aspects of information about the provenance of archival records, since this information is essential to the records' care and use. The more archivists and their clients know about the complex contexts which have shaped records, the more meaningful the records will be.

One feature of this contextual information about the history or provenance of records which has received increased attention of late is functional context. By examining in greater depth the functions records creators perform, archivists help foster new ways of understanding the records in their custody. This is especially important and challenging for visual materials in archives, since oftentimes their context of creation has been ignored and is therefore difficult to determine, existing largely outside the visual record itself. The manifestation of this general archival problem is particularized at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives (HBCA) and is the subject of the final chapter. A review of the archival legacy of the Hudson's Bay Company calendars concludes with suggestions for enhancing archival services by employing a wider range of contextual information about these colourful visual documents.

Extensive research in Hudson's Bay Company archival records situates the HBC calendar program within the broader history of the Company's twentieth-century business operations, most notably its efforts to enhance its public relations activities in the half-century leading to its 300th anniversary in 1970. The HBC's calendars, though created by different artists and Company officials and representing a wide range of historical situations, generally conform to a consistent portrayal of the HBC as an institution with an honourable past, one intertwined with and contributing at many key points to the overall progress of Canada. The discourse of the calendars simultaneously reinforced the Company's present day power and authority, and thus its commercial interests. Consequently, the calendars need to be seen not so much as 'pictures of history', but as expressions of the HBC's corporate identity and ideology.