

gallerieswest

Patricia Bovey

Champion of the visual arts retires from the Canadian Senate.

by Paul Gessell

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Patricia Bovey in her Senate office. (photo by Senate Communications)

During her seven years in the Senate, Patricia Bovey attempted to do more for the country's visual artists than probably anyone else who has ever sat in the Upper Chamber.

The operative word here is “attempted” because some of Bovey’s key legislative initiatives will not be enacted before the Manitoba senator, a [former director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery](#) and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, leaves the Senate on Monday, having reached the mandatory retirement age of 75.

Bovey’s most [important initiatives](#) tended to have support among all political parties but nevertheless fell victim to parliamentary prorogations, election calls and impossibly full legislative agendas, as well as political inertia and intrigue. Generally, governments act knowing there are more votes in subsidized daycare, dental plans and new factories than in the arts.

Nevertheless, the self-described Pollyanna remains “optimistic” her attempts to create new federal policies to help visual artists will bear fruit via a coterie of allies on the Hill who will continue to champion her causes. She specifically mentions Senator Andrew Cardozo, a former president of the Ottawa-based Pearson Centre for Progressive Policy and a painter himself.



Patricia Bovey speaks at the Winnipeg Art Gallery on April 11 in her final arts advocacy speaking engagement as a senator. (photo by Christine Sentongo-Andersen)

Among Bovey's pet projects is finding a way to [ensure artists are compensated](#) when their works are resold. "I'm expecting it to get into the next Copyright Act unless they find a way to get it into regulations before then," she says.

Another project is creating the post of parliamentary visual artist laureate, just as there is already a parliamentary poet laureate. The bill was debated on second reading in the Commons a few weeks ago. "That one is very much alive and has tremendous support from people across the House of Commons," says Bovey.

In April, a Bovey bill to recognize the critical role art and artists play in Canadian life was scheduled for debate in the Commons but [fell off the agenda](#) when no MP surfaced to sponsor it. A sponsor in the lower house is necessary for a bill initially passed by the Senate, as Bovey's was.

Manitoba MP Jim Carr had agreed to be its sponsor, but he died Dec. 12, 2022. Bovey said she had marshalled support from other MPs but, at the last minute, "other things were going on behind the scenes" and the bill was swept off the table. Bovey declined to discuss what those "other things" were.

While debating the bill last year in the Senate, Bovey declared: "This will be the foundation for developing the necessary policies for the arts, museums and performance halls, art galleries, workshops, publishing houses and more."

She remains optimistic the bill will resurface “with some variations” and be passed by Parliament.



Patricia Bovey at the inaugural Museums at the Senate installation in 2021. (courtesy the Senate of Canada)

Bovey had more luck with [various programs](#) she [instituted](#) to [add art to the Senate](#) and convincing a Senate committee to devote more time to the study of “cultural diplomacy.”

She was appointed to the Senate by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and became a member of the Progressive Senate Group. She says she operated in a non-partisan fashion and is generally loath to join critics who accuse the Liberal government of dragging its feet on important arts-related issues, such

as reinvigorating the [Portrait Gallery of Canada](#), a project Bovey supports.



Patricia Bovey chats with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at the throne speech in September 2020. (photo by Senate Communications)

But she does not hide her frustration with [government inaction on problems](#) plaguing the National Gallery of Canada related to a restructuring begun by former director Sasha Suda before her departure last year to lead an American museum. Suda was replaced, on an interim basis, by acting director Angela Cassie, a former executive of the Canadian Museum for Human Rights in Winnipeg. Cassie, who lacks an art background or experience running a large institution, is plowing ahead with a controversial remake of the gallery, firing senior staff and mounting few exhibitions.

“I’ll be very interested to see who they’ll appoint,” says Bovey, a former member of the gallery’s board. “I hope it is somebody who has an art background. Whether it is art history or contemporary criticism, it needs to be at least one of those, maybe both, and I believe it should be somebody who has run an art museum or a gallery before because they are complex institutions.”

Bovey says she will not stop promoting her causes just because she has retired from the Senate. She met recently with Justice Minister David Lametti to push for legislation on art fraud. She plans to continue lobbying on the issue from her base in Winnipeg.

She also has a few books she wants to write, including a biography of George Swinton, an Austrian-born Manitoba artist and art professor who championed Inuit art. Bovey has written previous books, including ones on Manitoba artist [Don Proch](#) and Victoria artist [Pat Martin Bates](#), as well as her most recent, *Western Voices in Canadian Art*, published earlier this year by the University of Manitoba Press.