

ALBERTA MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION: KEYNOTE ADDRESS

The Hon Patricia Bovey, LLD, FRSA, FCMA

September 17, 2022

CHALLENGES: OPPORTUNITIES: SUCCESSES & MEANINGFUL FUTURES

Thank you. It is a real privilege to be here and I thank you for inviting me to be part of this annual conference and for the sessions I was able to attend today! Thanks to the Aviation Museum too for the reception last night. I visited the new Royal Western Aviation Museum in Winnipeg a few weeks ago and they are both excellent, their approaches and histories are different and equally important! May I extend my thanks to all the speakers and my congratulations to this year's award recipients.

This afternoon, I start by honouring Queen Elizabeth II whose funeral is in two days. She well knew the important role of culture, of museums, of public collections, accessibility, and of creative understanding and the need to continue to develop cross-cultural knowledge and values. All of us in the museum sector have benefitted from her insights and steadfastness.

Let me also give you my heartiest congratulations on your excellent study, *Museums for Me: Engaging Canadians on the Future of Museums*. Its germane, achievable, compelling, and challenging results align with conclusions I have drawn over the years from my research. I spoke about many of these in my recent CMA Fellows' Lecture.

Clearly museums **must** change in order to fulfill our societal roles and have a sustainable, meaningful future. Building on their core mandates and embracing new paradigms, museums must understand and use their collections, exhibitions, public programming, and outreach in new ways.

Paramount core values going forward are balance, creativity, honesty, inclusivity, and the engagement of every part of contemporary society, all peoples, all issues and all perspectives. Museums have the necessary foundations, staff, trust and knowledge to achieve new goals, and dealing with serious societal concerns will reinvigorate audiences and museum professionals.

I was impressed that “2/3 of your survey respondents visit museums at least three times a year”. I agree with the comments that museums have been “too Euro-centric in their approaches”. I felt that in the early 1970s as a curator at the Winnipeg Art Gallery when we presented the early First Nations art exhibitions, and again through the 1980s and 90s as Director of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria with our Asian collection, exhibitions and artist exchanges. Securing funding for those, then non-mainstream exhibitions and programs, was truly difficult. I have also felt a certain Euro-centricity in some reactions to my national and international Senate work with Black artists. I believe the more museums engage multi-culturally, the easier cross-cultural understandings and meaningful reconciliation actions will be.

I fully agree with your Report's statement that "more should be done to help people understand today's world and address a variety of social and economic issues, such as inclusion and accessibility... Indigenous reconciliation ... and understand and accommodate people from other regions and cultures."

Museums are key agents for that. If we as museums and galleries undertake those goals sincerely, I believe present day societal divisions would be fewer.

Remember, families go to museums together; they do NOT go to school together. Indeed, just last month, ICOM adopted a new definition of 'museums' reflecting these societal concerns:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

Referencing museums as being not-for-profit, the definition includes the words "inclusivity", "accessibility", "sustainability" and "ethics" for the first time. ICOM's president, Alberto Garlandi, underlined those values saying this new definition, was "common ground for museums all over the world." As the August 2022 Art Newspaper quoted, he said "This new definition is aligned with some of the major changes in the role of museums today. We have been forced to change. I really think that this this decision will improve the role of the museum around the world." I hope we are making this change because we want to, not because we have been forced to.

How do we make the change? Partnerships are key. True understanding of our own communities and being open to realities of contemporary societal issues are essential. In researching my forthcoming book, *Western Voices in Canadian Art*, and talking to artists, their clairvoyant role in bringing societal issues to the fore was very clear. Those voices need appropriate platforms and museums should be those platforms.

As society's trusted leaders, while stewarding our material, natural, scientific and creative past and present, museums have the opportunity AND responsibility to change public awareness in today's rapid, and drastic, paradigm shifts. Climate change, reconciliation, the pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, crises of immigration, and humanitarian and environmental realities are huge.

In the Chamber last spring I had the opportunity to ask Minister Guilbeault, Minister of the Environment, how, and if, he intended to work with artists and the cultural sector in meeting his climate change goals. His response was an unwavering yes. As Minister of Canadian Heritage, and of the Environment, he knows the important role we play and is engaging with us. I will be part of his official COP 27 delegation to Egypt in November and can assure you that my brief will be that of the museum, arts and culture sectors.

So, what can museums do? We must expand awareness of climate change science. The impacts on lives and communities are significant. We have the substance to illuminate those truths to make those concerns known. We must also set an example. How do we work? What materials do we use in our exhibitions? Do we break down display cases, or reuse and share them?

How do we organize and ship touring exhibitions? Are we attentive to routes and modes of transport, minimizing their carbon footprints? Are we using digital media to its fullest effect? What do we serve in our cafes?

At the 2021 UK Gallery Climate Coalitions conference in London “Decarbonizing the Art World” it was agreed they should adopt a “step-by-step action plan using the carbon calculator designed for the art industry”. We should too.

Museums also have a key role in understanding diverse cultures. I was truly moved seeing the Indigenous works in the Vatican collections, as I was by the recent visit of the Pope. Her Majesty’s many visits to our north and to indigenous communities drew attention to poignant realities and challenges too. We must further cultural understandings and diligently keep that focus in our sights and not give up. We must be patient. We know it took generations to get into the situation we are in; it will take time to get through it. Senator Sinclair often opined that education got us into this mess and education will get us out of it. Curriculum changes throughout our educational systems are essential. While these have started, I cannot overemphasize how important it is for museums to lead that change by presenting varied perspectives rooted in truth and founded in research.

London’s Horniman Museum, one of my favourites, has been confronting its colonialist roots with excellent results. Building on the social unrest of Covid and George Floyd’s murder, they realized they were not reaching their local demographic, more than 40% Black.

They therefore “reimagined and reinvented the role a museum can play within a local community”. Their “Reset Agenda”, in their words “using these events as points of departure for thinking about what a museum is there for, and what it can do”, reframed their food services, public programming, music presentations, festivals and collections. Heralded as a “model for how museums with traditional collections can be vibrant and relevant places for today’s audiences,” they recently received the world’s largest award for this type of work: 100,000 pounds. This is leadership.

Heather George, the CMA’s new President wrote in this summer’s *Muse*, “A leader works for the betterment of the whole community; a leader knows they ... are only as good as their team; a leader is not silent in the face of injustice; a leader is the first to clear the path for others... they challenge... and inspire us to journey down new paths.” Everyone in this room can do all that!

Museums, individually and collectively, are windows to the past, present and future, as engager, teacher, encourager, inspirer, innovator, and honest broker. Remember, our collections are not ours but are held in the public trust. Our research, exhibitions, publications, and programs are presented for public benefit, not our own personal advancement. We are to serve those of all ages, diversities and perspectives. My late husband often said “we are all better off when we are all better off”. Museums have the power to achieve that by using our collections of ‘real things’ in new ways, and by continuing our important research in our many museological fields.

Being firm in our non-negotiables, and knowing and meeting our fuller roles, museums will become even more compelling influencers.

Society knows the cultural sector's power. Do WE really know how to empower our own sector to deal effectively with society's shifts? We should not be afraid to take risks as we build platforms for the future. We must free ourselves from the silos in which our sector has been mired or encaged. Too often museums are perceived as places people visit in their spare time, if they have the spare money to do so. Our entrance fees are not cheap. I understand charging for special exhibitions, but increasingly I have difficulty in charging our publics to see what they own in their public trust. Changing those public perceptions is in our hands.

The arts, including museums, are essential in every part of society. However, their substantive impacts are not widely known. Those impacts range from health and well-being, to crime prevention, rural sustainability, the economy, employment, education, the environment and tourism. I have researched those stats, national and international, for decades. UK, US and Swedish research showed one striking reality - people who attend arts events, including museums, live on average two years longer, cost the health system less, miss less work and get out of hospital one or two days earlier after elective surgery.

Those international results impelled me to start St Boniface Hospital's Buhler Gallery fifteen years ago this month. Its results have been really encouraging and reinforced the earlier international ones. Indeed, Edmonton's Jennifer Bowser was our first intern the year after we opened.

I applaud Montreal's medical community in prescribing museum visits to the Musée des Beaux Arts as treatment. The UK's program of arts and wellness, well-funded nationally, is impressive, with significant results. I have had a number of discussions with proponents of both, and have attended some of the UK training sessions and have met with their founders, funders and leaders.

I also think we should have longer lines of vision, back and forward. We have been forced into the mode of reporting numbers: short-term annual numbers, attendance, self-generated \$, numbers of programs. The expectation has been that all should increase annually. We also report on the short-term outcomes of project grants. Those reports done at the end of the program do not, nor cannot, measure longer term impacts.

That reality was apparent to me a number of years ago when visiting Victoria some years after we moved back to Winnipeg. A young woman who knew my name, and that I was director of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria when we presented a solo retrospective of deceased artist Richard Ciccimarra's art, told me she was a student at the near-by middle school at the time and had visited every day after school. She loved his beautiful botanical paintings and his lonely, deep, psychological inscapes. She told me she was angry when she realized he was not alive to answer her questions. He had committed suicide some years before, a suicide she felt was selfish. She showed me scars on her wrists; she had attempted suicide several times before we mounted this exhibition, one which subsequently inspired her, and changed her life.

By the time I met her she had her MSW and was working with young teens who either had tried or were thinking of suicide. For me, that encounter was moving; an exceptional 'outcome', impossible to report on at the time. That, years after the exhibition, was likely one of the most important outcomes of any program I have been involved with. We all have unknown outcomes that are far more significant than we are aware of.

Our responsibility to reach all audiences, including those with disabilities or who are deaf, is equally important. At the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, about 40 years ago, in the early 1980s, we developed what I still consider to be an excellent program for the visually impaired. In partnership with the CNIB, we gave special training to our volunteers, involved artists, used hands-on artifacts from our research collection, and gave regular exhibition tours. The program, which gained many accolades and awards, ran for years. Participants returned time after time for tours and discussions. We know 90% of people who are officially blind have had sight and want to remain engaged in what we do. Some participants had had careers as artists. I am pleased to see more institutions taking such constructive steps in their programming. At the time, though, I was criticized by some colleagues for 'jumping on a socialist bandwagon.' Several years later those same colleagues asked me how we did it!

What am I doing now as a Canadian Senator to advance cultural, arts and heritage issues? My sightlines are multifold and integrally intertwined.

The mandate the Prime Minister gave me on my Senate appointment was to work on everything, but to do so through the lens of arts and culture, that is exactly what I do and have done.

They include highlighting the essential roles of arts and culture; artists' resale rights, which to my delight is all over the national and international press and I am receiving very germane legal advice. My concerns also include issues around art theft, fakes and the illicit art trade; international illegal appropriation and mass reproduction of Indigenous images, and cultural and family crests, which has also made waves nationally and internationally I am glad to say. Other issues in my sight are repatriation of Indigenous art and cultural works; and the return of looted and ill-gained stolen works. Work on reconciliation is essential, including reconciliations. The Arctic and circumpolar concerns are on my plate as is the Pan African Heritage Museum which is opening in Ghana late next year. I thank all the Black artists of all disciplines who are involved in this exciting and important initiative.

I am involved in Senate committees, legislation in the Senate, many public issues and have developed specific bills currently going through parliamentary processes.

While I may have ideas for solutions for some conundrums, I have none, alas, for others. However, I do know we must ask questions to bring salient concerns to the fore hoping that collectively we can make this place a better place.

Are we, for instance, willing as professionals to assist in training Border staff about materials, real cultural heritage, and stem Canada's international soft border reputation regarding the illicit movement of fake or stolen works? After all the mahogany totem poles that come in can't be real. Mahogany trees don't grow in our west coast rain forests, or indeed anywhere in Canada! What is the difference between mahogany and cedar? Are 3D printed reproductions properly labeled, or passed off as originals? BC artist and elder Richard Hunt and I discussed these issues just last week.

Within the Senate the understanding of the role of the arts and heritage is increasing. The Artwork & Heritage Advisory Working Group, which I chair, has updated its policies and procedures to meet museological standards and has instigated a number of programs with Canada's museum and gallery colleagues. *Cultivating Perspectives*, as one, examines works in the Senate collection.

Canadian curators, representing cultural diversities of Canada and museological fields, write about Senate art and heritage pieces, providing varied and interesting contexts drawn from their own professional curatorial perspectives and expertise. Many of their essays are on line; others will be added soon; and more will be commissioned. Let me know if you are interested in taking part.

Honouring Canada's Black Artists has had two installations thus far. Denyse Thomosos, Tim Whiten, Yisa Akinbolaji and Chantal Gibson have been featured. *Museums in the Senate*, began this past year with the installation of Inuit art from the WAG in one of our key committee rooms. We look forward to other Canadian museums and art galleries participating. Let me know if you are interested!

Another concern is the representation of Indigenous art. Let me underline here that the Senate did pass UNDRIP, it is now law, and our Senate debates were heartfelt, as our ongoing discussions on Truth and Reconciliation. The National Gallery's Audain Senior Curator of Indigenous Art, Greg Hill, did an important, and excellent, gap analysis of the Senate's Indigenous art to assist us in planning for wider representation in our Indigenous Peoples room. Another recent project related to current issues, *Visual Voices*, with photographs by Edward Burtynsky and Roberta Bondar, focuses on climate change. Other issues will be featured. May I say that Roberta Bondar's Foundation is about to offer an new exhibition and if you think you might be interested reach out to them, or me.

Committee work is essential. Our June 2019 Senate Foreign Affairs and International Trade Committee's report *Cultural Diplomacy at the Front Stage of Canada's Foreign Policy*, is foundational, being heralded by policy influencers. I hope the government will restore culture as a pillar of Canada's foreign policy. Incidentally and importantly, the Indigenous Curatorial Collective were witnesses.

Likewise, the 2019 report *Northern Lights: A Wake-Up Call for the Future of Canada*, has become a cornerstone. The result of the year-long study of the Special Senate Committee on the Arctic, it addresses many interwoven critical issues of the north, from housing to health, education to communications, science, traditional knowledge, climate change, global warming, international security, sovereignty, country foods, culture, wildlife, mining and more. It is the first Senate report I am aware of that included Canadian Art.

My work in and for the North has been very important to me, before and after my Senate appointment. A few days ago, I was in Yellowknife visiting the Northern Heritage Centre and the Visual Art Trailer and discussed a number of salient future issues with their leaders. I also visited Gjoa Haven where the wider concerns of research in food security, artists' needs and climate change were my focus. While science and hydroponics were the prime reason for my visit there, I was pleased to meet the man who gave the information which led to the finding of the Franklin ship. His story was fascinating as was their Heritage Centre which married science and culture. I hope to revisit Cape Dorset soon.

As for my cultural legislation? The *Parliamentary Visual Artist Laureate Bill*, to create a revolving position for a visual artist like that of the Poet Laureate, has unanimously passed the senate three times. It is now in the House of Commons, sponsored by Alberta Conservative MP Martin Shields. I hope it becomes law before I have to retire from the Senate next May! Please encourage him to move quickly on this as it affects us all and could be a milestone in reconciliation!

My Declaration Respecting the Essential Role of Artists and Creative Expression in Canada, has passed Senate Committee hearings. This Declaration recognizes the vitally important role of artists and the arts in every dimension of Canadian society. It underlines the need to respect and promote that role in health and education, and highlights the need for artists to earn proper, fair, incomes, and have intellectual property rights, and exhibition opportunities at home and abroad. It aims to ensure all Canadians and residents of Canada have equal opportunity to access and enjoy the fruits of artistic expression.

The measures to achieve the Declaration's goals take into account the diversity of identities, cultures, languages, customs, and practices of First Nations, Inuit, and Metis, and recognizes Francophone and immigrant communities in Canada. Its Ministerial action plan includes consultations with the Ministers of Labour, Crown-Indigenous Relations; Justice; Health; the Canada Council; provincial government representatives; arts organizations, including Indigenous artists and their cultural associations; and "all other interested persons or organizations the Minister considers appropriate". May it pass the Senate's Third Reading and move quickly to the House of Commons where MP Jim Carr will be its sponsor. I want parliamentarians and ministry officials to understand and work with museums and the arts.

The consultations in developing it were rich and I thank the more than 600 participants in my focus groups, public discussions and interviews. One person aptly said "The power of the arts is being increasingly recognized as a non-negotiable fundamental principle as to who we are." Bill Ivey, former Chair of the US National Endowment for the Arts, talked of the three categories of human behaviour: "Expressive life, work life and family life," and that "The act of participation in, and with, the creative spirit is essential for human and societal growth." Museums are the natural leaders for these goals, and for de-colonization, ensuring cultural democracy, and correcting the telling of Canadian history to include Indigenous, Black and diverse histories. Memory and the expression of honesty of our past and present is critical. Museums do that, and your report calls for more.

Perceptions of the arts and museums must move from being ‘frill’ to that of ‘anchor’, and real care must be taken not to create, or perpetuate, cultural ghettos. I hope this Declaration will assist in balancing the multi dimensions of society and become the foundation for all arts and culture policy frameworks, including the new museums policy, intellectual and economic rights of artists and arts workers, and ensuring audiences, practitioners, and those with any disability, or who are deaf, have accessibility to museums and creative spaces and places.

It behooves us to remember that the four pillars of sustainable communities are Social Capital, Human Capital, Natural Capital and CULTURAL CAPITAL. Without cultural capital, that fourth pillar, society becomes an unbalanced three-legged stool!

Australia’s John Hawkes, author of *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture’s essential role in public planning*, has said:

Creativity = Light from the Dark

Art = Fire from the Light

Culture = Warmth from the Fire

Doesn’t that sound like our wider mandate as museums?

Musician and writer Tom Jackson said of the arts’ importance in one discussion: “it not as power, but as proclaiming truth, history, memory and future vision simultaneously. ... it saves lives.” Embracing compassion, empathy, and hope, he said, it “talks to us, moves us through its tools of change”. Why? “People must understand emotion from the heart and not just dollars.” So true! I agree wholeheartedly! What a way for us all to build bridges.

I am a firm proponent of Hill Days in assisting to building bridges. Enabling you to articulate your goals, Hill Days are your chance for one-on-one connections with Senators and MPs. I am disappointed museums are the only part of the arts sector which has not had one in my 6 years in the Senate, and it's unlikely one will happen while I'm there. A miss, I feel. Also, do accept invitations to be witnesses at Senate committees, or ask to appear. I cannot over stress the benefit of taking part to develop relationships *and* trust.

In conclusion, my take-aways? We connect with all professions, and should connect with all ministries. I don't think we explore those links sufficiently. If we don't, how can we expect others who don't know the depth of our collections and our research to? We can and must assist various sectors to reach their goals. Museums have the collections, the ability, ideas, places, and community trust to make significant societal change, BUT require new ways and connections to be fully effective. We need to think differently so society can think differently. For example, let's shelve the idea of 'grants' in favour of 'investments'. 'Grants', or 'handouts', as they are perceived, render us as non-self-sustaining whiners. Facts do not bear that out.

I examined three years of grants and taxes and found the arts paid to the various levels of government three times more in taxes than the total of governments' collective grants budgets. Interesting, isn't it, that we are the sector that pays back three times what we are given within the year it is given. Do other sectors?

Again, congratulations on your report, its findings and the ways you are incorporating its results into your work. I will follow your endeavours with great interest! Please let me know if I can help in any way. I do have to retire from the Senate next spring -- it's an age thing -- but I will not retire from my commitment to the arts, museums, and culture, and their roles in society! I will not retire from my work for artists' rights and their enshrinement in the revised copyright act, and I will not retire from my art historical work and art writing in the west.

Thank you for inviting me today, and thank you for your continuing work and dedication to the public trust.