



# DEBATES OF THE SENATE

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## **CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPACTS OF MÉTIS, INUIT, AND FIRST NATIONS**

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

Speech by:  
The Honourable Patricia Bovey

Tuesday, April 26, 2022

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### CONTRIBUTIONS AND IMPACTS OF MÉTIS, INUIT, AND FIRST NATIONS

INQUIRY—DEBATE CONTINUED

**Hon. Patricia Bovey:** Honourable Senators, I speak from the unceded territory and traditional lands of the Algonquin and Anishinaabe.

It is an honour to speak tonight to Senator Boyer's inquiry drawing attention to the positive contributions and impacts that the Métis, Inuit and First Nations have made to Canada and the world, especially after the visit of Indigenous leaders to the Vatican. Seeing the Indigenous treasures in the Vatican Museums was truly moving.

Colleagues, the contributions and impacts of Canada's Indigenous people are huge and impossible to overstate. I will keep my remarks to what I know best — First Nations, Métis and Inuit visual artists, the North and the West, contributions not adequately known, celebrated or even understood. I thank Senator Boyer for this opportunity to shine light on some of the world's truly significant creators.

Indigenous artists created important work long before contact with Europeans — carvings, stonework, petroglyphs, quillwork, birchbark biting — all with natural materials — porcupine quills, plants for dyes, stone, wood, hide, bone and cedar bark.

In the 1880s, the Winnipeg Women's Art Association made the presentation of First Nations art a key priority, a priority they honoured. It was not until 1967 when First Nations art was first presented in the National Gallery of Canada. Inuit art had primarily been considered as ethnographic and anthropological artifacts, but not art, until the early 1950s when the Winnipeg Art Gallery became Canada's first art gallery to seriously collect and exhibit Inuit art. It now has a major international collection of modern and contemporary Inuit art housed and presented in Quamajuk, its new Inuit art centre.

Inuit exhibitions have gone to Washington and Europe. Indeed, Inuit art for many years was the face of Canada abroad. Artists like Pitseolak Ashoona, Kenojuak Ashevak, and Shuvina Ashoona have been proudly acclaimed in major international institutions. An exhibition from Cape Dorset is in Warsaw now, and receiving great headlines — "West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative art exhibition in Warsaw opens to great response amid political turmoil." I learned last night that this exhibition has been extended.

In 1972, the Indigenous Group of Seven was founded by famed artist Daphne Odjig, who passed away in 2016 at 97. Odjig, Norval Morrisseau, Jackson Beardy, Alex Janvier, Eddie Cobiness, Carl Ray and Joseph Sanchez developed the Woodland style of painting. That year, the Winnipeg Art Gallery presented their first major exhibition — the first totally devoted to Indigenous art in any art gallery. These artists' works were

shown across Canada and overseas, and Jackson Beardy travelled to Paris with artists from Winnipeg's Grand Western Canadian Screen Shop for their exhibition in the mid-1970s.

Inuit, Métis and First Nations artists at home collectively and singly have drawn attention to key societal issues, to their and our histories, and they have developed innovative means of expression and ways of creating. The work of Indigenous artists is prescient, poignant, celebrated and leading edge.

I have spoken before about Indigenous artists and art, including Robert Houle, Joane Cardinal-Schubert, Arthur Vickers, Art Thompson, Faye Heavyshield and others. I won't repeat what I have said before. Many accomplished works are now being widely published and seen globally. Some international art history programs are now introducing courses in North American Indigenous art. This, colleagues, is recognition of the importance, substance and scope of work by Inuit, Métis and First Nations artists. Their work is changing the world in a good way.

Indigenous art embodies spirituality, lifestyles, history, place and contemporary issues enhancing past and present understandings and future hopes.

A major work by Michif artist Christi Belcourt is in Centre Block. Her multi-panelled residential school legacy window titled *Giniigaaniimenaaning (Looking Ahead)* was unveiled in November 2012. She describes it this way:

It is a story of Aboriginal people, with our ceremonies, languages, and cultural knowledge intact; through the darkness of the residential school era; to an awakening sounded by a drum; an apology that spoke to the heart; hope for reconciliation; transformation and healing through dance, ceremony, language; and resilience into the present day.

The broken glass also represents the shattered lives, shattered families and shattered communities . . . The drum dancer sounds the beginning of the healing. The circles moving up . . . paving the way for an apology. . . The dove with the olive branch brings an offering of hope for the beginning of reconciliation and the renewal of the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the rest of Canada.

Métis artist Rosalie Favell explored her adoption into a White family in her poignant 1999 series "Longing and Not Belonging". She has also turned her visual attention to aspects of art history leading to the inclusion of Indigenous art and artists in art lexicons. Joseph Tisiga, originally from Yukon, visually voiced the family experience of his mother being scooped. Not afraid to cite their own experiences, they created work that is raw and deep, important contributions to the whole as to who we are as a nation.

The spiritual is within the work of many Indigenous artists. Haida artist Robert Davidson explores his spirituality in his two- and three-dimensional works. His sculpture “Supernatural Eye” in the National Gallery of Canada collection is a prime example. Fabricated from aluminum, he cut the graceful, linear contours using a waterjet process, evoking cut-outs in appliqué blankets — the blankets which spread smallpox, devastating the Haida nation. Davidson combines traditional visual iconography with his own contemporary aesthetic. Inspired by his Haida spiritual, supernatural and historical roots in Haida Gwaii, the eye, the dominant feature, forces us to look within and without.

Anishinaabe artist Scott Benesiinaabandan works in photography, video and printmaking and explores his interest in dreams and celebrates his sense of ancestral pride. Delving into his roots and futures, he maps his cultural history and the accomplishments of his First Nations ancestors. In his residency in Australia, he superimposed images from there and here.

Alberta’s Terrance Houle’s work is both humorous and direct. In his “Urban Indian Series”, dressed in traditional powwow regalia, he goes about daily activities — grocery shopping, riding a bus, in a contemporary office — highlighting the changing ways of life of Canada’s Indigenous peoples. More blatant, “Tiniwahkiimah” was in Mass MoCA’s Oh, Canada Exhibition in Massachusetts 10 years ago. A large decal of a bison dripping oil is on the wall. Four oil cans are on the floor below. He told me the First Nations had to learn how to get by without the bison, which for centuries had provided food, tools, housing and clothes. Now they will be able to teach the rest of society how to adapt without oil.

Internationally lauded, much honoured Cree artist Jane Ash Poitras also depicts Indigenous history, spiritual beliefs and personal lives of First Nations people. Her visual directness empowers Indigenous nations, while unsettling viewers who are ignorant of the history. Her work “Preservation Reservation 2020,” commissioned by the Alberta government, refers to residential schools. Full of details elucidating decades of past difficult and often buried histories, she included ephemera, as she calls it: collage clippings, photographs, a 14-cent stamp of Parliament Hill, the alphabet, and the Hudson’s Bay Company’s characteristic blanket stripes. Divided into segments, her paintings tell multiple stories covering multiple time frames and situations. She emphasizes that the story has to be completely told.

Val Vint, Métis artist and knowledge keeper, unveiled her “Education is the New Bison” at Winnipeg’s The Forks in 2020. Tying the past, present and future together, as Poitras’s art does, it is made of steel books and films, by Indigenous authors and artists and, as she says, allies of Indigenous people.

The titles on the spines show past and recent books, demonstrating the depth and extent of intellectual pursuits, ideas and accomplishments of Indigenous writers. Vint quotes Louis Riel, former senator Murray Sinclair and artist Robert Davidson in the three polished, open volumes. The bison faces across the river to the gravesite of her grandfather and looks forward.

This is what Vint told me about her work:

People begin meaningful conversations around the bison. Conversation is critical in any healing work. When people talk to each other usually they see each other’s eyes and are no longer ‘the other.’ When there is no other it changes how we see each other, how we think of each other. We soon discover that nobody is the ‘other’; we are all the same; we are all related.

This powerful message impacts all of us.

Robert Boyer, Saskatchewan Cree and Métis artist, and founder of the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry, or SCANA, holds a significant role in Canadian art. A leader through his art and SCANA, he did much to foster an awareness of Indigenous art and challenged its paradigm in Canadian art galleries, collections, exhibitions and research. His vivid and visceral paintings address colonialism, environmental destruction and Indigenous culture. Boyer overlays and intersects Indigenous and non-Indigenous visual traditions, an approach that highlights the depth and poignancy of his message. In his compelling blankets series, part of an important touring exhibition, he says he used “geometric design to reflect personal experiences, social issues, and spirituality.”

Rebecca Belmore has likewise played a truly significant role in leadership in the visual arts, expanding the awareness, rights and representation of First Nations artists’ work. She was the first female Indigenous artist to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale, which she did in 2005. She has had residencies, teaching positions and many solo exhibitions over her career. Her multi-storey clay installation, “trace,” was at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights.

Coast Salish artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun’s exhibition in Canada House, London, received great acclaim. Modern art, surrealism, pop art, abstract expressionism and his native Coast Salish imagery combine to portray the stark reality of the subjugation of First Nations. He simultaneously underlines the power and strength of Indigenous people. He frequently portrays suited businessmen wearing West Coast First Nations’ masks, suggestive of boardroom and corporate confrontations and meetings. He marks the importance of the environment and the spirituality and heritage of West Coast trees. He dubs his approach as “visionist.” His painting style, strong colour and symbolic imagery are gripping and transformative to the viewer.

Winnipeg-born First Nations artist Kent Monkman has had significant national and international acclaim with recent exhibitions and installations at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art and Washington’s Hirshhorn.

Dana Claxton, recipient of the 2020 Governor General’s Award in Visual and Media Arts, is a University of British Columbia visual arts professor. Her spiritual roots are core:

My work has been about spirit-ancestors-NDN ways of knowing—Lakota teachings—generosity / wisdom / fortitude / courage / and more spirit / celebrating and honouring ourselves / and never surrendering / showing our NDN beauty.

Multi-sensorial and using mixed multimedia, her videos, installations and performances overlap the visual and audio, bringing the viewer into her art. She writes:

I'm influenced by my own experience as a Lakota woman, a Canadian, a mixed-blood Canadian, and my own relationship to the natural and supernatural world.

KC Adams, recipient of our Senate 150 Medal, meaningfully addressed Winnipeg's racism with her series of dual, black and white, side-by-side portrait photographs of Indigenous people, done after the Idle No More movement. They were presented outside, on Winnipeg's streets, on bus shelters, billboards, walls and posters. They were fully accessible. The positive engagement was significant.

Just yesterday, the *Victoria Times Colonist* showed Coast Salish artist Maynard Johnny Jr.'s design of a Salish heron on the side of a B.C. ferry.

Colleagues, I won't go on. You get my point. The art of Canada's Metis, Inuit and First Nations artists is indeed powerful, important and has — and is — making a positive difference. Their unique visual vocabularies convey deeply felt messages. I hope society listens. Their talent and innovations are groundbreaking. The results at home and abroad emphasize cultural goals, understandings and actions. They all have had significant roles in moving the needle towards reconciliation.

I honour and respect them. Thank you.

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