

COMMENTARY

Art is an Engine for Canadian Society

The first art historian to serve as a senator in Ottawa argues for the “essential role” of art and creative expression.

by The Hon. Patricia Bovey, FRSA, FCMA

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Patricia Bovey in her Ottawa office with “Winter Palace,” 2009, by Winnipeg artist David Owen Lucas. (courtesy the Senate of Canada)

Patricia Bovey was appointed as an Independent Senator for Manitoba in 2016. In her distinguished career, she has served as the director of both the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and as an adjunct professor of art history at the University of Winnipeg. The author of numerous books, she is currently finishing one about Western Canadian art. Her many duties in the Senate include chairing the Artwork and Heritage Advisory Working Group.

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The root meaning of culture, as every farmer and chemist knows, is ‘preparation



playwright and former chair of the Canada Council for the Arts

As a universal language, the arts are a lever for social and cultural change, mirroring society and reflecting on multiple issues. Integral to all societal endeavours, culture and creative expression are at the heart of every community and its diversity. Defining the spirit of place and individual and societal humanness, art is transportive, embodying social inclusion, societal cohesion and our historical roots and experiences. The arts are not power; they present truth, honesty and integrity. As John Ralston Saul has opined: “Culture is the motor of every successful society.”

I concur with the view that the arts are being increasingly recognized as a non-negotiable fundamental principle as to who we are. I am concerned, however, that the arts are still siloed, perceived as a societal frill. My goal as a Canadian senator is to move the arts from frill to society’s anchor.

Over decades, I have anecdotally and empirically examined the role of the arts in health, the economy, employment, rural revival, education, crime prevention, tourism and the environment. I have diagrammed the results as an octopus, each tentacle representing an issue, none of which, in my view, can be solved, or even addressed, without the arts. The fundamental importance of arts and culture is magnified in reaching reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples and those of cultural diversities.

“We must build agency in every part of Canada by respecting practicing artists, arts workers and audiences.”

I frequently state that artists raise critically important societal concerns. We must listen to those voices in all their creative expressions. They tell us so poignantly who we are and what we must address as a society. More than 600 artists, arts workers and arts leaders participated in national focus groups I have held in recent months regarding my new initiative to formally recognize the essential role of artists and creative expression in Canada. I thank them sincerely. The discussions were substantial and truly insightful, challenging and complex, and all contributed constructively.

An installation in the foyer of the Senate chamber that honours Canada's Black artists: Yisa Akinbolaji, "Stolen Identities," 2018, acrylic and oil on canvas, 65" x 48" (left) and Chantal Gibson, "Who's Who in Canada?: A Historical In(ter)vention," 2014, mixed-media altered book sculpture, "Who's Who in Canada 1927" directory of notable Canadians and black cotton thread, process video, MP3 with e-reader (courtesy the Senate of Canada)

The Senate is implementing various initiatives aimed at enhancing connections with Canadians through the arts. When I was appointed in 2016, I became the first art historian and museologist to serve as a senator. At the time, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau challenged me to do all my work through the lens of arts and culture. I do. Introducing, speaking to and implementing arts initiatives is an honour. These include my forthcoming Declaration Respecting the Essential Role of Artists and Creative Expression in Canada and my private member's bill, S-205, [the Parliamentary Visual Artist Laureate](#). I'm also working on four projects

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Respecting the Essential Role of Artists

The Declaration Respecting the Essential Role of Artists and Creative Expression in Canada, to be tabled soon, is overarching. Aimed at balancing the multiple needs and dimensions of society, it would be a basket for arts and culture frameworks, securing the intellectual and economic rights of practicing creative artists and arts workers, as well as ensuring accessibility to creative spaces and places for audiences and practitioners.

It would establish the guiding principles, vision, mission and core values for artistic and creative expression and their engagement as the basis for policy and legislative development. This would include everything from COVID-19 recovery, a new national museums policy and an initiative to support Black communities to the implementation of reconciliation goals with Indigenous Peoples and addressing medical and mental health issues. In other words, it recognizes and affirms an expansive role for the arts and creative expression.

The arts are key in dealing with issues related to the environment, decolonization and cultural democracy, as well as questioning history, power, legislation and dominant cultures. I think the concept of ‘excellence’ in the arts should also be challenged. Creative processes and innovation, not only the creative product, are core.

Living conditions, the economic and health security of artists and creative gig workers, along with copyright protection and freedoms of expression and association are paramount. We must build agency in every part of Canada by respecting practicing artists, arts workers and audiences – whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, immigrant or Canadian-born. We must honour the creation, presentation and dissemination of creative work by treating artists and arts workers fairly and equitably in all contractual relationships.

Tom Forrestall, "Portrait of the Honourable Noël Kinsella," 2007-2008, acrylic on canvas, 70" x 56" (courtesy the Senate's National Curatorial Interpretation Project)

A Visual Artist Laureate for Parliament

A Parliamentary Visual Artist Laureate, Bill S-205 is innovative. By visually bringing Canadians the substance of Parliament's endeavours, it would underpin the importance of our democracy.

The artist laureate would communicate parliamentary values, perspectives, principles and realities to life-long and new Canadians, immigrants and refugees. The resulting art would depict the issues being deliberated, and reflect on what is seen, heard and perceived. It could address the knowledge gap in civics and parliamentary

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The Senate and Parliament have a strong societal responsibility. So, too, do artists. Many have expressed how critical a visual artist laureate would be in bringing these responsibilities together in concrete and meaningful ways.

Allen Sapp, "Indian Drums," 1972, acrylic on canvas, 23" x 29" (courtesy the Senate's National Curatorial Interpretation Project)

Four other Senate projects

Two of the four projects launched by the Senate's Artwork and Heritage Advisory Working Group relate to the Senate's art collection, comprised of commissioned portraits of Speakers and donations and loans from several federal agencies.

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The national curatorial interpretation project will connect Canadians with these works. Over the next two years, curators from each province and territory will write about works installed in the Senate of Canada Building. Enhancing knowledge about the Senate's public trust, their insights will be published online and in print, in English and French. Those by Indigenous curators will also be in their Indigenous language.

Simultaneously, Greg Hill, the Indigenous curator at the National Gallery of Canada, is assessing Indigenous art in the Senate, both defining gaps and developing a plan to address those gaps.

A third project is a rotating installation that honours Canada's Black artists in the foyer of the Senate chamber. The first iteration, on view until June 30, includes works by Manitoba's Yisa Akinbolaji and British Columbia's Chantal Gibson.

The fourth project, in the coming fiscal year, will see the working group invite one or two Canadian galleries and museums annually to install pieces from their collections in Senate committee rooms. These partnerships will introduce many new voices to the Senate and its visitors, underlining the richness of Canada's *patrimoine*.

Collectively, these endeavours form a suite of Senate arts initiatives. They build on traditions like the [parliamentary poet laureate](#) and the commissioned Speakers' portraits, as well as the 2019 report [Cultural Diplomacy at the Front Stage of Canada's Foreign Policy](#), and the first-ever Canadian art reproductions in a Senate publication – the 2019 [Northern Lights: A Wake-Up Call for the Future of Canada](#).

I hope these initiatives will increase awareness about the depth and currency of Canadian artists, emphasizing their real significance to every aspect of Canadian life. Art has tied us together this past year, through the pandemic, as well as the Nova Scotia murders and the Black Lives Matters' issues and protests. Art will bring us back together in our post-pandemic lives. Valuing creative talent values all Canadians – their voices, well-being, and sense of identity and belonging – while enriching the economy and international understanding. ■

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