

# Feature

from the 2017 conference

## Societal Expectations

### The Future Role of Museums

#### Senator Patricia Bovey

*The following is an abridged version of the Keynote Address given by Senator Patricia Bovey, FRSA, FCMA, to the BCMA 2017 Annual Conference delegates. For the full speech, please visit the [BCMA website](#).*

As Canada enters its second 150 years as a nation we face huge challenges. As we all know we are a country built on diverse immigrant peoples, our citizenry is comprised of people from every country around the world – the only nation to be so – and of course we are blessed with the richness and depth of Canada's Indigenous, Métis and Inuit peoples, many of whom have been here for millennia. With this diversity and depth, we are the envy of many around the world. Globally people are wanting to know more about Canada. We can fulfil that need!

There is no question that the changing external world order is having tremendous impacts on us all in every part of the country, and beyond, with climate change, our own challenges for reconciliation and healing between Canada's Indigenous peoples and the non-Indigenous populations, and the increased immigration from war torn parts of the world. These issues only serve -to enhance our responsibilities.

Museums also have increasing responsibility to be a leader in the education for all our publics, giving voice through our collections, research, exhibitions, publications and programs, to showcase Canada's many immigrants, and in turn to tell them our stories. Society expects us to enable the understanding of the multicultural dimensions of our country. While we have all presented exhibitions showing aspects of many of our immigrant cultures, are

we reaching out to recent refugees and immigrants as we might, both showcasing their roots AND giving them an understanding of Canada, our history and our values as a nation? Are we presenting stories in a way that have currency to those who may not speak either of our official languages? Are we in fact presenting opportunities for language acquisition?

We naturally like to show the positive developments of Canadian society and how far we have come, but we should not be fearful of giving witness to societal injustices and the darker side of our history and present – whether that within our prisons, or our treatment of transgendered people, the issues of murdered and missing women, or of those living in conditions far below the national norm who lack running water, insulated houses, whose food is far more expensive and with less

security than that in cities, or for whom milk costs more than alcohol. The list goes on.

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I believe museums can and should take a positive role in coming up with solutions to some of our contemporary problems, both by presenting and defining the issues and by suggesting resolutions. Providing increasing foundations to engage audiences in discussion and debate is important – often more poignant and compelling than just reading about current issues. Our ‘language’ of material history and art **IS** an international one.

How many of us learned about the Holocaust in school? In books? From the stories told by those who survived? From exhibitions? Here or abroad? Our experiences obviously differ given our respective ages. Suffice it to say, we learn from multiple sources, and true learning is lifelong learning. Museums afford

our publics the opportunity of lifelong learning through our multi-dimensional means – artifacts, didactic panels, digitally, through books, catalogues, films, talks, interviews. We must use every possible way, actual and virtual, to provide for meaningful engagement. In some cases our individual mandates may overlap – and that is fine – it serves to deepen the substance of the engagement. The Royal BC Museum, the Vancouver Art Gallery, the Museum of Vancouver, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and Museum at Campbell River, for instance, each delve into some of the same issues, though with differing perspectives and for differing reasons. Through collaborations we can further enhance our ongoing reassessment of history as more information comes to the fore – I am not speaking about revisionist history, but the adding of newly realized facts to what we have already known. Are our dioramas correct? Are our installations of decades past still relevant?

Museums provide time and space for reflection, nostalgia, learning, hope, fun, visioning, and for dialogue and meaningful engagement. Our work also has a positive impact on well-being and health. Decades of cumulative research has shown that those who participate in the arts – including museums – live two years longer and cost the health system less, and they get out of hospital a day or two earlier after elective surgery. I am delighted to say that museums have changed their per-

spective on that involvement over the past few decades.

I well remember the rebuking I received from colleagues for the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria’s award-winning program for the blind which we launched in the early 1980s! I was told many times that I was just “jumping on the socialist bandwagon”. In initiating that program we were endeavouring to provide accessibility to those who for various reasons could not participate or benefit from traditional museum programming. It was a huge success and it has subsequently been copied and further developed by many institutions. I can also say that when we started our pioneering public Buhler Gallery at St Boniface Hospital, exactly ten years ago, we more than met our wildest initial goals within our first year! We therefore shifted and pushed our expectations and I am proud to say our impact has been transformational for patients, their families, hospital staff and volunteers and the wider public.

Likewise, international studies have proven that active participation in the arts has had a hugely positive impact on reducing arrest rates for youth, and on reducing recidivism rates for those aged 11 to 14. The youth take on responsibility. It is certainly more productive and rewarding to work as a team on something creative than being part of a gang. Given the public’s trust in our work, and the strength of our



**Right:** BCMA Past-President David Alexander with Keynote Speaker Senator Patricia Bovey at the BCMA Conference 2017. Photo credit: Ben Fast

resources in our collections, staff and spaces, I think museums can take a more active role in this work too – especially as we are not a ‘school’.

Professional training is also critically important and I believe museums could, and should, increasingly partner with our universities to allow for the balance of theory and practice so those entering the field will be able to fulfill their potential.

I know museums hire students, and have interns and practicums. But we can do more. Experiential learning has been the cornerstone of the University of Winnipeg’s MA in Curatorial Practice. The students have year-long placements – which have included the Manitoba Museum, the Winnipeg Art Gallery, the Buhler Gallery, Plug-In Institute of Contemporary Art, the Royal Aviation Museum, and the Hudson Bay Archives. Undergraduates in the program undertook a year-long internship in the Buhler Gallery. All the graduates from the program have either gone on to do PhDs or have work in the field.

Looking ahead, it is also my hope that museum researchers will play an ever-increasing role in research across Canada in all fields. Contributing solid research in partnership with other agencies as we raise difficult

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societal issues, will strengthen the impact of public discussion and debate. We know that museums have the expertise to lead research teams in many fields, building on past museological accomplishments in so many areas, including science, aviation, transportation, technology and human and natural history. Canadian artists do too as they create their work, giving voice to their insights and visions.

There is much more – but time is too short – so suffice it to say in conclusion, as I have always said, museums connect creators and community, and provide access between artists and audiences. We do that more now than ever before. The ‘I’ in the word society heralds innovation, inclusion, integrity; the ‘E’ tying the two syllables in the word Museum together, evokes engagement, experimentation, excellence, exploration and ethics.

As we seek to meet the societal expectations before us, and fulfill our roles as museums, regardless of our individual fields of endeavour, we must present ourselves as we are, ensuring our audiences leave having learned something, participated in something, and had fun doing so!