

## A Banquet of Consequences

Three national cultural institutions are at urgent crossroads.

by Zainub Verjee

December 26, 2022 5:45 PM



Faces of cultural power, from left to right: Caroline Dromaguet, incoming CEO at the Canadian Museum of History; Simon Brault, outgoing CEO at the Canada Council for the Arts; and Angela Cassie, interim CEO at the National Gallery of Canada.

As the year comes to an end, we find ourselves sitting at a banquet of consequences.

Three national cultural institutions – the Canada Council for the Arts, the Canadian Museum of History and, most dramatically, the National Gallery of Canada – are at urgent crossroads with changes in leadership either pending or recently announced by the federal government.

Canadian Heritage has just regularized the appointment of the history museum's interim CEO **Caroline Dromaguet** after the troubled departure of Mark O'Neill, who **resigned 20 months** ago after an independent investigation into workplace harassment that the government has never released.



Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Que. (photo by Sylvain Perrier)

Meanwhile, Simon Brault, CEO since 2014 at the Canada Council, the country's public arts funder, is coming to the end of his second mandate in 2023. With rounds of interviews scheduled to pick a replacement, we should expect news of an appointment in late spring.

Given the art sector's many brewing issues – from pandemic recovery to the impact of rising interest rates and the soaring cost of living – naming a new head has become an urgent matter. Pressing questions abound. What, for instance, do all the rate hikes imply for the political economy of the cultural sector? How do they impact the labour of artists? How is art influenced by recent macroeconomic decisions? While we have to be circumspect of proposals that captured the public imagination in the early days of the pandemic, we also need to recognize that the arts and culture sector was able to offer “policy from below” that centred arguments for art as a public good. This is pertinent given the October declaration at the international [Mondiacult 2022](#) UNESCO conference in Mexico City that culture is a “global public good.”

In contrast to the deafening silence on these questions, much attention has focused on the implosion that followed the recent [layoffs of four senior staff](#) at the National Gallery of Canada by interim CEO Angela Cassie, appointed after the sudden departure last summer of Sasha Suda. The controversy over the gallery's actions has sucked oxygen from the arts and culture sector, even as the board's chair, Françoise Lyon, extended support to Cassie.



National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.

However, well-placed sources say the staff departures were not a sudden development. With personality clashes, turf wars and power grabs, the toxicity had built over time. Even prior to the layoffs, stakeholders – including two unions that represent two-thirds of gallery employees, as well as a group of prominent donors and collectors – had written to Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez about their concerns. Given the additional pressure since then and the fact that the gallery’s base annual appropriation from Parliament is nearly \$37 million, Rodriguez has **asked the board** for clarity.

But let’s take a step back and ask a question: What is the National Gallery? Figuratively, it is a triad – an art collection entity, a cultural institution, and, legislatively, an instrument of culture. Each of its three components have different valencies.

Often it is the collection component – **acquisition** and **deaccession** – that puts the gallery in the news, while its allied **exhibition** program plays second fiddle. The acquisition budget and storage space are chronic issues, while the politics around collection practices has created ambivalence for some time.

But how does the art gallery fare as a cultural institution? And how are stakeholders defining their claims? Those are historical problems. Here, I am reminded of American sociologist Vera Zolberg’s pioneering 1981 study, *Conflicting Visions in American Art Museums*, which threw light on the changing responsibilities of

museums at the end of the 20th century. Her study illuminated systemic tensions between trustees, curators and managers, with their differing goals, some of which converge, and institutions that variously serve as hobbies for affluent amateurs, ivory towers for research and “playgrounds” for the public. These pluralistic aspects fuel debates about who is most capable of leading such an institution.

Thus, contestation exists amongst responsibilities directly relating to the art in the collection, those dealing with the business of managing an institution, and delivering on its legislated mandate as an instrument of culture. In the present context, two other developments have added further complexity: the social justice narrative and the imperatives of the digital turn.



Canadian Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez

Often, when a curatorial discourse dominates, we start to lose sight of the big picture of what the gallery represents. Although we now see the social justice narrative dominating the institution’s proclaimed transition, it is not surprising to have curatorial orthodoxy **upping its ante** in the town-and-gown dispute over the layoffs – and to see pressure for accountability. Meanwhile, former director Marc Mayer has jumped into the fray, describing what is happening as a coup-d’état, while former board chair Michael Tims has called for the “prompt appointment” of a new director.

### ***Conversations about art and cultural institutions need to go beyond virtue signalling or presenting Canadian art as a fait accompli.***

With equity and diversity as the central plank of the intended changes, we are seeing how that can play out.

Decolonization, diversity or equity are not just metaphors. Nor are they swappable terms or synonymous. One cannot take a skin-deep approach to defining them. Grafting them onto pre-existing discourses and frameworks – even in well-intentioned and non-racist ways that are embedded in justice frameworks – will not move the needle.

As American academics **Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang** have thoughtfully argued:

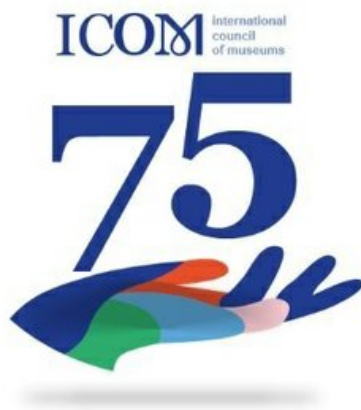
“When metaphor invades decolonization, it kills the very possibility of decolonization; it recenters whiteness, it resettles theory, it extends innocence to the settler, it entertains a settler future ... The easy absorption, adoption, and transposing of decolonization is yet another form of settler appropriation.”

Precisely to avoid such a trap, Galleries Ontario Galleries, which serves public art galleries, addressed the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s call to review museum policies and practices, by organizing a **three-day think tank** in 2020 to engage with questions about reconciling institutional practices. Observers from Canadian Heritage and the Canadian Museums Association witnessed the deliberations.



Former director of the National Gallery of Canada Hsio-yen Shih in 1977. (courtesy NGC)

who clearly understood and embraced the import of such an explicit instrument and aligned it with the art collection and the cultural-institution aspects of the gallery.



In the long arc of history, cultural battles are not new. We saw this during the tenure of Hsio-yen Shih, a Chinese-born Canadian art historian who, in 1977 became the first person of colour appointed to head the National Gallery of Canada. The challenges of leading cultural institutions, particularly in tumultuous times when the meaning of culture, cultural policies and cultural wars are in play, are always **understated**.

Where does this leave the gallery's role as an instrument of culture? Your guess is as good as mine. In my view, it was perhaps the National Gallery's eighth director, Shirley L. Thomson, in the role from 1987 to 1997,



Former director of the National Gallery of Canada Shirley L. Thomson. (photo by Brian Willer, CNW Group / NGC Foundation)

To add to this burden, we must consider other fundamental questions: What is an art museum?

What does the term mean? There have been **fiery debates** on this issue. Earlier this year, the International Council of Museums, a global organization of museums and museum professionals with formal ties to UNESCO, agreed on a **new definition** that recognizes evolving thinking around issues like inclusivity, accessibility and sustainability. Its compromise has all the buzzwords, but where do we see the National Gallery from this vantage point?

In a time of disinformation, declining trust in public institutions is apparent. Given the current challenges, conversations about art and cultural institutions need to go beyond virtue signalling or presenting Canadian art as a *fait accompli*. Groupthink will not help us ask the right questions to address the many pressing issues at hand. Ironically, with the National Gallery of Canada unravelling as it is, one can find fresh meaning in its recent branding: "Ankosé – Everything is Connected – Tout est relié." ■

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(courtesy NGC / AREA 17)

27 December 2022 issue



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December 26, 2022 5:45 PM

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