

# The Representation of First Nations Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario

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## Article abstract

Canadian art galleries have long been criticized for their poor inclusion of First Nations art, especially historical works. In November 2008, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) opened new Canadian art gallery halls, with 2,000 new acquisitions donated by Ken Thomson. The AGO hired Gerald McMaster, who has tried to make historical First Nations art a key element of the story of Canadian art, as its first Aboriginal curator of the AGO's Canadian art department. This article reviews several historical events, and the politics and discourse of the representation of First Nations art at the AGO, to examine the success of this new venture, especially in terms of its public appeal.

## ***The Representation of First Nations Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario***

### **Abstract**

*Canadian art galleries have long been criticized for their poor inclusion of First Nations art, especially historical works. In November 2008, the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) opened new Canadian art gallery halls, with 2,000 new acquisitions donated by Ken Thomson. The AGO hired Gerald McMaster, who has tried to make historical First Nations art a key element of the story of Canadian art, as its first Aboriginal curator of the AGO's Canadian art department. This article reviews several historical events, and the politics and discourse of the representation of First Nations art at the AGO, to examine the success of this new venture, especially in terms of its public appeal.*

### **Résumé**

*Les musées des beaux-arts canadiens sont critiqués depuis longtemps pour leur mauvaise inclusion de l'art des Premières Nations, notamment les objets historiques. En novembre 2008, le Musée des beaux-arts de l'Ontario (l'AGO) a ouvert de nouvelles salles d'art canadien, avec 2,000 nouvelles acquisitions données au musée par Ken Thomson. L'AGO a employé Gerald McMaster comme premier curateur d'origine autochtone du musée et il a essayé de faire de l'art des Premières Nations un élément historique important de l'art canadien. Cet article propose donc un rappel des événements historiques, des politiques et des discours de la représentation de l'art des Premières Nations à l'AGO, pour évaluer le succès de cette nouvelle entreprise et de son attrait pour le grand public.*

### **First Nations and Canadian Art Galleries**

Many scholars have argued that Canadian art galleries have poorly represented First Nations art, particularly objects prior to the mid-twentieth century (Jessup, *Hard Inclusion* xiv; Martin, *Politics*; Martin, *An/other one*). Canadian art galleries have, in fact, long been dominated by an art/artefact binary (Clifford), where only European art is considered art, to the exclusion of artworks by non-European Canadians (Li). Under such ideologies, First Nations works have not been considered artworks and instead have been located exclusively in anthropological museums (Jessup, *Hard Inclusion* xiv). Some art galleries have recently begun to increase their collections of First Nations art. Nevertheless, they have “shied away from displaying historical objects and have focused their attention on works by contemporary [First Nations artists] whose choice of media and style of execution fit more easily into their existing collections”

(Whitelaw 198). Canadian art galleries have been spaces of exclusion in the representation of First Nations art.

Since the release in 1992 of *Turning the Page: Forging New Partnerships Between Museums and First Peoples* by the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples, several events demonstrate that Canadian art galleries have changed. For example, in 1992, the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa hosted *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada*, the first large-scale exhibition of contemporary art by First Nations artists at a major Canadian art gallery. Across the river from the National Gallery, the Canadian Museum of Civilization hosted *INDIGENA: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, “the first [exhibit] to be mounted by a major institution in which all the key participants—the curators, artists, and writers who contributed essays and poems to the catalogue—are members of the Native community” (Phillips, “Making Space” 18). The year 1992—the 500th anniversary of Columbus’ voyage to what is now America—is therefore marked as a turning point in the representation of First Nations art in Canadian art galleries and museums.

The Canada Council has also supported art galleries to purchase First Nations art and to hire Aboriginal curators. After a sixty-year suspension of the acquisition of First Nations art since 1927, the National Gallery of Canada purchased Carl Beam’s *The North American Iceberg* in 1986 and has since increased its collection of First Nations art. In 2003, the National Gallery opened *Art of This Land* and exhibited some historical First Nations artworks to give “evidence of the diversity and richness of [Aboriginal] artistic production, and [to illustrate] its evolution from ancient times to the present day” (National Gallery, “National”). Norval Morrisseau: *Shaman Artist* in 2006 was the first solo exhibition of a First Nations artist at the National Gallery of Canada. In Quebec, the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts opened a new Canada and Quebec gallery in September 2011 and the exhibits of First Nations art, mostly from the Northwest Coast, were slightly expanded.

In Toronto in November 2008, the Art Gallery of Ontario also opened new gallery halls to house some of the 2,000 new acquisitions donated by Ken Thomson. According to the AGO, the Thomson Collection was “the most significant private art collection in Canada” (AGO, New Art). Pieces of the Thomson Collection vary from seventeenth-century ship models to nine hundred European artworks, including *The Massacre of the Innocents* by Peter Paul Rubens, a seventeenth-century work. It also includes signature works by Canadian artists from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, three hundred of which are by the Group of Seven and Tom Thomson, as well as “First Nations objects which span two millennia, from around 200 BC to the late-nineteenth century” (AGO, *First Nations Works*). Apparently, some seven hundred new artworks of the Thomson Collection have made the AGO’s Canadian art hall more attractive and impressive.

But more importantly, regarding Aboriginal representation, was the AGO's hiring of Gerald McMaster, not as a curator of First Nations art but as a curator of Canadian art, the first Aboriginal curator to hold to position (Reid 15). Dennis Reid, AGO's director of collections and research and senior curator of Canadian art at the time, stated that "One of our goals is to make historical First Nations art a key element of the story of Canadian art and [McMaster] will play a pivotal role in helping us build that part of our collection" (ibid.).

This article aims to assess the above statement. As the second largest art gallery in Ontario, the AGO has taken a significant role in the development of Canadian art. In its history, a number of exhibitions and meetings have been held at the gallery, which has accumulated collections and documentations of major artists, art dealers and collectors, artist-run galleries, and other people and organizations that have shaped the "Canadian art world" since the early-nineteenth century (AGO, *Overview*). The AGO is therefore a good case study to discuss the politics of representation and inclusion/exclusion of First Nations art in Canadian art galleries.

### **The Importance of First Nations Art in Canadian Art History**

Why should Canadian art galleries include First Nations art? The simple answer is that First Nations have expressed their artistic sense and visual aesthetics through materials since prior to European contact (Gray 138). The inclusion of First Nations art is also important because Canadian art history is not complete without examining the interconnections between First Nations and Europeans. For example, such commodified art (souvenir art) as Northwest Coast carvings and Iroquoian embroideries and beadworks represents the interrelated history between First Nations and Europeans (McMaster, *Our (Inter)* 5). First Nations artists made those artworks for European travellers and colonizers looking for "curios" and in this interaction, the artists improved their craft skills. European women sometimes learned embroidery skills from First Nations works (Phillips, *Trading* x), which would not have been possible without the artistic sense and critical eye of the original Native artist. Commodified art was also the evidence of cultural and economic resistance to the former federal assimilation policy (Raibmon). The exclusion of commodified art therefore ignores the subjectivity and history of First Nations.

Since the early twentieth century, however, dominated by the art/artefact binary (Clifford), Canadian art galleries until recently did not pay much attention to the construction of an inclusive national art history that examines the interrelatedness between First Nations and Europeans (McMaster, *Our (Inter)* 5–6). Canadian art history has placed European art at its core and "Aboriginal art histories continue to be treated independently of Euro-Canadian art history" (ibid. 5).

At the Vancouver Art Gallery, for example, when they began collecting in 1931, the art of First Nations peoples was far from the minds of the gallery founders. The 1930s represented a time when the artistic practices of First Nations were collected by ethnographic or history museums rather than art galleries. The presence of First Nations people and culture within the collections of the Vancouver Art Gallery was through their depiction in the works of art by non-Native people. It was not until the 1980s that the Vancouver Art Gallery... began to collect First Nations work with any regularity. (Vancouver Art Gallery)

Today, the Vancouver Art Gallery almost exclusively collects contemporary works from First Nations artists (*ibid.*). After 75 years from its opening, however, the Vancouver Art Gallery exhibits First Nations art rather poorly compared to landscape paintings by Emily Carr, even though British Columbia raised many First Nations artists. The Montreal Museum of Fine Art also has long specialized in collecting European art (Gillam 64). In Ottawa, while the National Gallery of Canada collected European art, First Nations objects were collected by the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Even the new *Art of This Land*—"a virtual exhibition that mirrors the new installation of Aboriginal art within the Gallery's permanent collection of Canadian art" (National Gallery, "Art") — is criticized for the way First Nations artworks are displayed. According to Whitelaw, First Nations works merely serve to explain the historical background of paintings by white Canadians such as Paul Kane, which nostalgically depict a disappearing Aboriginal world (Whitelaw 201). Furthermore, with fewer than five pieces of contemporary First Nations artwork, the National Gallery does not mention the interrelatedness between First Nations and Europeans, nor does it systematically show the historical and cultural diversity of First Nations art. Indeed most galleries have few pieces of First Nations art and this absence is an oversight in Canadian art history. First Nations cannot learn their history and culture through artworks at the public institution and this lack gives visitors an impression that First Nations did not have an artistic sense prior to the European contact.

Furthermore, the way Aboriginal society has been represented in landscape paintings by white artists is problematic. Today, landscape paintings, especially those painted by Tom Thomson and the Group of Seven, are considered representative of Canadian art. However, these artists often did not depict First Nations society or people of the early twentieth century in their paintings to stress the "untouched nature" and "wilderness" of Canada. Such artists as Paul Kane, Cornelius Krieghoff, Emily Carr, and Edwin Holgate nostalgically represented the "disappearing" First Nations culture (c.f. Jessup, *Group of Seven*; Dawn). Canadian landscapes in these paintings do not satisfactorily represent First Nations' subjectivity and resistance for survival. Therefore the exclusion of First Nations art from the art gallery is not merely an issue of how to interpret art and artefact, but how to understand Canada's national

history. In this context, it is clear why First Nations artists and curators have put pressure on art galleries to include First Nations art, particularly historical pieces. But has the new Canadian art gallery at the AGO changed the way to represent Canadian art?

### **History of the AGO: Controversy Around the Representation of First Nations Art**

An overview of its collection and exhibition history demonstrates how the AGO has not been completely ignorant of the importance of First Nations art. Rather, in many cases, the AGO encountered challenges and found excuses to exclude First Nations art from its collection. In this section, I review several key events and special exhibitions regarding the representation of First Nations art.

The AGO began as the Art Museum of Toronto, established on 31 March 1900, and soon became an important space for Canadian artists. The Art Museum of Toronto changed its name to the Art Gallery of Toronto in 1919 and the institution quickly became popular. Interestingly, in the 1920s, the majority of gallery visitors were women (Kimmel 203–6). In its history, the AGO has hosted a number of exhibitions and meetings and has accumulated collections and their documentation that have shaped the Canadian art world since the early-nineteenth century. The records are therefore “a rich resource for research into the activities of the Group of Seven, the Canadian Group of Painters, the Ontario Society of Artists, and other Ontario (and Canadian) art societies” (AGO, *About*). The gallery changed its name to the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1966, with a mandate to serve the entire province.

In the early-twentieth century, however, the Canadian art world, as represented by the AGO, appeared to have a limited sense of its mandate, targeting only European art for its collection. In the Art Gallery of Toronto’s 50-year anniversary publication, Walker et al. state that “[their] field seems naturally to define itself as European Art from the end of the middle ages and its extension into North America” (10), while their specific task is “to promote and further art interests in Ontario” (8). Acquisitions were limited to paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints by European artists. Walker et al. state that

... modern art in Europe was affected by the discovery of the native arts of primitive people notably in Africa and Australia, and the influence has been in evidence both in Canada and the United States. It would be proper for us to show this by European examples, but, as the Royal Ontario Museum has a collection of these primitive objects, it would be folly to compete with them. (10)

The above statement clarifies that the aesthetic value of “primitive people” and the interrelatedness between European and non-European art was recognized. The AGO thus had a chance to demonstrate its “inclusion” of

Canadian art history at the beginning of its history, but decided not to collect non-European art, including First Nations art, because of the wish to avoid overlapping collections with the Royal Ontario Museum.

A pivotal and exceptional exhibition at the Art Gallery of Toronto in the early-twentieth century was *Canadian West Coast Art: Native and Modern*, organized by the National Gallery of Canada in 1927 and sent to the Art Gallery of Toronto the following year. *Native and Modern* represented Canadian interrelatedness between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, and was a rare exception in featuring Canadian interrelated history (McMaster, *Our (Inter)* 5). *Native and Modern* was also one of the first exhibitions to bring Aboriginal aesthetics into the art world. The catalogue states:

The purpose of the Trustees of the National Gallery in arranging this exhibition of West Coast Indian Art combined with the work of a number of Canadian artists who, from the days of Paul Kane to the present day, have recorded their impression of that region, is to mingle for the first time the art work of the Canadian West Coast tribes with that of our more sophisticated artists in an endeavour to analyse their relationships to one another, if such exists, and particularly to enable this primitive and interesting art to take a definite place as one of the most valuable of Canada's artistic productions. (Barbeau, *Exhibition* 3)

In the exhibition, the organizer and the founder of Canadian anthropology, Marius Barbeau, tried to see "the Indian sense of creative design and high craftsmanship deeply rooted in his national consciousness" (Barbeau, *Exhibition* 3), and "the native artists' [manifestation of] their amazing sense of decorative fitness and beauty. It also tried to see regional diversity in the West Coast. The organizers saw the feature of Aboriginal art as "truly Canadian in its inspiration" (ibid. 4) and argued that this feature should be retained and revitalized before disappearing "under the penetration of trade and civilization" (ibid. 3).

After *Native and Modern*, until the 1980s, the AGO's policy to target European art did not appear to have changed, while pivotal events regarding the representation of First Nations art were observed outside the AGO. For example, in the 1960s, authoritative contemporary First Nations artists, such as Bill Reid, Norval Morrisseau, and Alex Janvier, emerged. Formerly trained in professional art schools, they introduced abstraction to First Nations art, or became founders of a new school. For the public, especially the art-buying public, the Aboriginal art market was ideal since the works proved "the value of [Canadian] traditional imagery" (Tom Hill, *Indian* 20). During the 1960s, Canada experienced its own identity crisis, concerned as it was about the cultural domination of the U.S. At the time, the need for Canadian identity helped establish the market popularity of Inuit art. First Nations art followed, encouraged by several events and exhibitions in the 1960s, such as *Arts of the*



*Raven: Masterworks of the Northwest Coast Indian*, Vancouver Art Gallery, 1967; *Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo art from Canada*, National Gallery of Canada, 1969; and *Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo '67 in Montreal* (ibid.). Among these, "Expo '67 was the most dazzling of many commemorative projects organized to celebrate Canada's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, and the Indians of Canada Pavilion emerged as a surprise highlight of the fair" (Phillips, "Show" 86). Tom Hill states that Expo '67 was a key event because it was the first time that Aboriginal artists from across Canada got together:

It's hard to believe, but they actually got together and talked and they were having the same problems out in BC or Nova Scotia or Toronto or wherever. So, there was a real need to change, to make some changes. Most of the artists were just beginning to crack the surfaces again of gaining some sort of reputation. Certainly ones from Expo, all had galleries, all were producing works of art, all were attracting a certain amount of attention. (Tom Hill, personal communication, 2 Dec. 2004)

The AGO seemed to be keeping its distance from the change that surrounded First Nations art in this period and no special exhibitions were organized in the 1960s or 1970s. The AGO only added a work by Norval Morrisseau to the collection of contemporary art in 1979 (AGO, *Annual Report*). In the early-1960s, the Contemporary Canadian Committee of the AGO was still collecting landscape paintings by "painters belonging to or associated with the Group of Seven and their successors, the Canadian Group of Painters" (AGO, *Selected* 49). In addition, "The Gallery's importance as a major repository of Canadian historical art was further strengthened in 1965 with the transfer of title of 340 works purchased since 1912 from the annual exhibitions of the Canadian National Exhibition" (47). Most of these works were European art (Pantazzi; Brooke and Wistow).

In contrast, the Royal Ontario Museum had hosted or accepted some special and travelling exhibitions on First Nations art, including, *Canadian Indian Art '74* (1974); *An Exhibition of Traditional Crafts of the Naskapi* (1977); *Quillwork by Native People in Canada* (1977); and even *Paul Kane: 1810–1871* (1972). The AGO and the Royal Ontario Museum were still using their "division" explanation, and the AGO was not collecting pieces of First Nations art.

Interestingly, at the AGO, Inuit art had a different status than First Nations art. In the 1970s and 1980s, the AGO accepted donations of Inuit art collections—including the Sarick Collection, the Isaacs Reference Collection, and the Klammer Collection—and began periodic exhibitions. Later, space for an Inuit gallery was planned and the Inuit Collection Committee was formed in 1988 (AGO, *Selected* 28). The AGO now claims "one of the finest collections



of Inuit art in the world” and more than five hundred sculptures are exhibited in the Inuit Visible Storage Gallery (AGO, *About*).

Not until the 1980s did a small but important change occur at the AGO: Seneca curator Tom Hill was hired in 1982 and had a big influence on collection policies. Hill, who had curated *Canadian Indian Art '74* at the Royal Ontario Museum, tried to introduce First Nations artwork as an art form, objecting to “scholars [who had] sought to use Indian art objects in scientific areas of anthropology... thus, [ignoring] the inherent aesthetic qualities” (Tom Hill, *Introduction* n.p.). He was successful in bringing *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers* to the AGO. The exhibition demonstrated the development of works by Morrisseau and his impact on both senior and junior members of the Woodland School (McLuhan and Hill 6). Tom Hill states that during the 1980s, artists began to shift some of their attention to more political positions. Exhibitions of First Nations art were more often curated by First Nations curators, as was *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers*.

A special exhibition, *From the Four Quarters: Native and European Art in Ontario 5000 BC to 1867 AD*, was also held in 1984. The organizers argued that this exhibition was a landmark in Canadian art history since “Native and European artistic traditions not only are given equal attention, but both are outlined in terms of a single chronological framework, and examined as mutually interacting aesthetic systems in response to a common set of geographical, historical, and cultural circumstances” (Reid and Vastokas 9). The objects displayed included Native coppers and banner stones from 5000 BC, clays and stones from the sixteenth century, Shaman rattles and drums from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, watercolour paintings by English artists from the nineteenth century, quillworks, and landscape paintings by Paul Kane. The developments of both Aboriginal and European art were examined side by side. The exhibition challenged the idea that First Nations objects lacked individual aesthetic expressiveness and therefore should be housed in an anthropology museum (Reid and Vastokas 9). It also challenged the idea that early colonial art was a documentary work with little aesthetic importance (ibid. 10). *From the Four Quarters* demonstrated the various functions of First Nations art, as well as a Canadian artistic tradition with a long and complex interrelatedness between First Nations and European art (ibid. 11–12). In AGO history, 1984 was an epoch-making year and may have been a turning point.

In 1992, the AGO released an important report: *Independent Task Force on the Future of the Art Gallery of Ontario*. It declared that AGO’s mission was “Bringing Art and People Together.” The report argued that it would be necessary to target culturally diverse populations and broaden its audience to increase the number of visitors in the long-term. In the short-term, the number of visitors could be increased by targeting the “traditional” audiences of the gallery, mainly

from the “dominant culture” (AGO, *Independent*). Thus, the AGO recognized its Eurocentricity in terms of both its collection and its audience. The report also recommended that broadening the audience should be done “through co-operative programming with and commitment to non-majority culture visual art producers and their audience,” rather than by acquiring artworks by ethnic minorities (*ibid.*). The report had almost no impact on increasing the collection of First Nations art, either historical or contemporary. Few special exhibitions on First Nations were held in the 1990s; the few exceptions included *Robert Houle: Anishnabe*, in 1994, and Carl Beam’s work, *The Columbus Suite*, which was temporarily exhibited in 1993.

The AGO also experienced some controversial events in the 1990s, such as the *Barnes Exhibit*, in 1994. This collection, established by Albert C. Barnes (1872–1951), is one of the finest collections of French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and early Modern paintings in the world (Barnes Foundation) and also includes African, Asian, and Native American artwork. Barnes collected these non-European objects as “art” that is, “as aesthetically important as other major art movements and traditions,” while his contemporaries collected them as “examples of ‘primitive’ cultural artifacts” (*ibid.*).

When the Barnes Collection travelled to the AGO, the sixth stop on the tour, none of 2500 African, Asian, and Native American artworks were included. According to AGO spokesperson Rob Berry, the Barnes Collection Board “determined what artworks would be included in the exhibition based on a U.S. court order giving the board permission to temporarily allow some of the artworks to leave their Philadelphia home” (Wallace 27). Members of the African community protested the exhibition, claiming that it perpetuated systemic and cultural racism against African art (Tator, Henry, and Mattis 63). Despite the protest, artworks of the non-European cultures represented in the collection were only shown by a large photographic panel. Art journalist Bronwyn Drainie raised key questions about the selection:

If Barnes was a “pioneer in the area of cross-cultural study of the visual arts” and passionately committed to the concept of integration of art forms from different cultural traditions, why was his collection displayed in such a way that the viewer is unable to see the formal connection between works created continents and centuries away? Why do we end up with a display of only French painters, which undermines what Barnes was trying to accomplish? (C1)

The director of the AGO, Glenn Lowry, claimed that “even though the exhibit contained only European masterpieces, they were so universal in quality that they would naturally lead the viewer’s mind to the richness of visual creation that has come out of all the world’s cultures” (*ibid.*). The African community argued that nothing of the multicultural nature of the collection

was highlighted in the exhibition although the AGO had used Toronto's ethnic and cultural diversity to land the exhibition (Tator, Henry, and Mattis 68). AGO excuses aside, European-style "high" art remained at the centre of the AGO.

Another controversial event was *The OH! Canada Project*, a concurrent program with *The Group of Seven: Art for a Nation* in 1996. *Art for a Nation*, highlighting the image of landscape and Canadian national spirit through works of the Group of Seven, was organized by the National Gallery of Canada for the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the group's first show, and it circulated around the country. Most visitors and the mainstream media highly appreciated the exhibition, except for *The OH! Canada Project* (Goddard 11).

*The OH! Canada Project* tried to discuss and debate the reality of contemporary Toronto culture and raised a fundamental question: "Why are minorities largely absent from large urban cultural institutions?" (AGO, *OH! Canada* 7; McIntyre 35). The project participants included members of Latino and African communities, as well as Tom Hill and Bill Powless from the Six Nations Reserve. The show organized interactive presentations, workshops, and events, though it was mostly dismissed as a noisy sideshow, receiving complaints and protests. The visitor survey clarified that the majority of visitors preferred *Art for a Nation*, which "presented the Group of Seven as famous artists, constructed a historical narrative of their development and provided expert opinion on their work" (Lisus and Ericson 199). Meanwhile, *The OH! Canada Project* was considered a misguided effort to "look at the art" (Goddard), and was even dismissed by some as an attack on white males, the AGO's "traditional" audience (Mays). While the project was intended to re-evaluate the relevance of the Group of Seven with "Canadianness," White argued that it "seemed only to further reinforce the idea that Canadian national identity was still very much located in the woods associated with the Group of Seven" (11). Some visitors and critics expressed intolerance and saw the use of multimedia to represent cultural diversity as mere noise against the "already-established White Canadianness" in Canadian art.

After the installation of Haida argillite by master carvers Charles Edenshaw and Isaac Chapman, donated by Roy G. Cole in 1999, the AGO finally began to increase the representation of First Nations art in the Canadian art gallery. The AGO co-hosted a conference titled *On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery* and the poor inclusion of First Nations art in Canadian art galleries was recognized afresh (Jessup with Bagg). The AGO also purchased an early-nineteenth century Anishnabe (Ojibwa) gunstock style club in September 2002. According to AGO curator Rick Hill, it was an historic acquisition—the first purchase of a First Nations object in its hundred-year history. The club was exhibited together with other Aboriginal and Euro-Canadian artworks in the R. Samuel McLaughlin Gallery (Richard Hill, *Samuel* 2).

In the McLaughlin Gallery, a single gallery hall was dedicated to “a curatorial laboratory for the inclusion of Aboriginal art,” named *The Meeting Ground* (Richard Hill, *Reinstallation* 52). *The Meeting Ground* directly challenged the traditional categorical distinction between Aboriginal and European Canadian art by bringing both together as historical art. For example, *The Thunderbird* and *The Virgin and Child* were juxtaposed to represent the meeting of cultures between Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity brought by European missionaries and traders in the seventeenth century. The gallery space was radically redesigned to create the meeting context and exhibited “Aboriginal art in a way that reflects the values and aesthetic sensibilities of Aboriginal cultures” (Richard Hill, *Samuel* 2). Video and computer technology were set up to show visitors art and ideas from both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives (Richard Hill, *Reinstallation* 51). *Meeting Ground* was the space to “creat[e] situations in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art is brought into conversation [and to show] that strong Aboriginal perspectives are at play in the design and the contextual discourse” (70). *The Meeting Ground* was closed in October 2003, along with the rest of the AGO’s Canadian wing, in preparation for the upcoming expansion project.

A review of the chronological events affecting the representation of First Nations art at the AGO demonstrates a contradiction. While the AGO has, since its establishment, recognized the aesthetic value of non-European art, it has also recognized its poor inclusion of First Nations art. The AGO has occasionally tried to change or introduce a new concept in some of its special exhibitions, however, they have often been stymied by counter-arguments and resistance to change, especially by “traditional” audiences or board members. The traditional claim is that non-European objects are not art but artefact, and thus do not deserve exhibition in an art gallery. Even during the planning of *The Meeting Ground* project, following the approval of the purchase of historical Aboriginal objects, a member of the acquisition committee argued that the objects were not artworks and should belong to the Royal Ontario Museum (ibid. 53). Surveys of visitors also indicated that most of the traditional audience were unaware of any First Nations art traditions from the region (ibid. 59).

First Nations curators have struggled for recognition in their profession, to increase the size of collections, or to enhance the audience’s understanding of First Nations art. First Nations curators are often hired on a project-by-project basis, not permanently. Nevertheless, the change and support from the institution seems to be inevitable, and the AGO’s decision to hire Gerald McMaster as curator of Canadian art is a step in this direction.

## AGO's new gallery

Canadian art has traditionally been understood as starting with the arrival of Europeans in the mid-1600s. The AGO's Canadian galleries have been conceived to tell a more inclusive history by incorporating much older First Nations and Inuit objects. As you walk through the galleries, you will notice different ways of interpreting Canadian art. In the Thomson Collection, up the stairs to your right, most of the galleries provide an in-depth look at the work of individual artists. The rest of the Canadian galleries feature artists of different periods to explore broad ideas and issues—how art is shaped by institutions and beliefs, how it reflects our shared and personal memories, and how it communicates cultural stories. (Text in Gallery 200, AGO)

The AGO gallery halls of Canadian art are located on the second floor. According to the visitors' guide, thirty-nine halls are dedicated to Canadian art. Of these, twenty-three display pieces from the Thomson Collection of Canadian Art, donated by Ken Thomson, and newly installed in November 2008. The other fourteen halls are for pieces of the J. S. McLean Centre for Canadian Art, a reinstallation of the AGO's original collection (Figure 1).

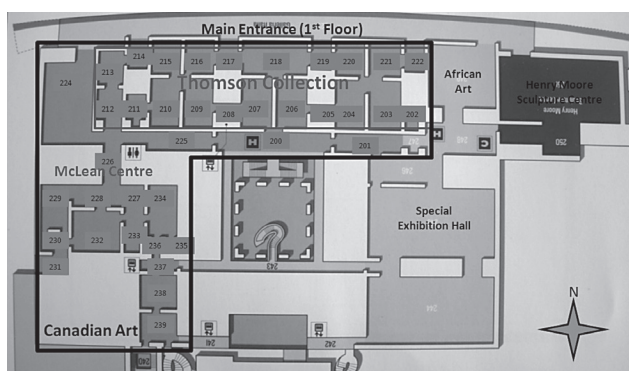


Figure 1. AGO's Second Floor (reproduced from the visitors' guide)

The gallery halls of the McLean Centre for Canadian Art are located on the west side, towards the rear of the building. Visitors who arrive at the second floor from the main entrance via the nearest stairs will come to the gallery halls of the Thomson Collection and find themselves surrounded by a vast number of landscape paintings by white Canadian artists, as well as a few pieces of historical First Nations art.

The representation of artworks from the Thomson Collection is in stark contrast to the representation in the McLean Centre. In the Thompson Collection, visitors are not provided with any accompanying texts or, in some cases, even captions on the wall. According to a volunteer guide, the absence of text allows visitors to immerse themselves in the world of Canadian landscape and enjoy each piece of artwork. Visitors can find captions in a small booklet

displayed in each gallery. In the McLean Centre, in contrast, visitors can find many texts explaining the concept of each gallery and how best to interpret the installations and artworks. According to Gerald McMaster, the McLean Centre is an “exploration of rich and complex diversity of Canadian art through abandoned voices and tells various voices” (McMaster, “Art and Ideas”). The McLean Centre challenges the idea that only works by white artists are Canadian art, by strategically juxtaposing works by white male artists with works by Aboriginal or female artists. The McLean Centre, therefore, is considered the successor to *The Meeting Ground* in representing the inter-relatedness between First Nations and European art, not a particularly new idea for the AGO, as McMaster might argue.

Let us start a gallery tour from the Thomson Collection. Visitors will likely first see either Gallery 207 (twenty-two paintings by the Group of Seven) or Gallery 206 (twenty-eight paintings by such white artists as Emily Carr, Paul Kane, and Edmund Morris). Gallery 207 also displays three pieces of historical First Nations art from the West Coast (two Tsimshian masks from 1750 and 1820–40; and a Nuu-chah-nulth salmon mobile from 1900). Gallery 206 displays a Raven rattle from 1860; a clapper from 1840–60; and a comb from 1840–60. The booklet for Gallery 206 celebrates the high achievement of First Nations art, stating, “Whether weapons or growing tools, rich attentive and inventive adornment of these works ensured they would be prized from the moment of their creation.” The booklet offers no explanation about why these particular six pieces were installed together with the fifty landscape paintings in two gallery halls.

Visitors would likely be attracted to Gallery 218, which displays forty-three paintings, mostly northern Ontario landscapes by Lawren Harris (from the Group of Seven). The blue tone of Lawren Harris’s gallery is impressive. Gallery 218 again displays three pieces of historical art from the Northwest Coast (a Tsimshian mask, 1820–40; a Nuu-chah-nulth salmon rattle, 1900; and a Tsimshian antler club, 1750). It is not clear, however, why “their linearity and bold design elicit deeper engagement with their respective creative traditions” when they are “[p]aired with the northern paintings of Harris from the 1920s and 1950s,” as the booklet states. Many critics have argued that the landscape representations by the Group of Seven emphasizes the “vast land and virgin wilderness,” while erasing the existence of Aboriginal people (e.g., Jessup, *Group*; Jessup, *Landscape of Sport*; Manning; Dawn). The forty-three landscape paintings by Harris are sufficiently impressive to obscure the three examples of First Nations art.

To the east of Gallery 218, five galleries (203–205, 220, 221) display 193 landscape paintings by white artists, including French Canadian artists from Quebec, Edmund Morris, and Cornelius Krieghoff. Actually, of the total, 104 pieces are by Krieghoff. Some of the works nostalgically depict the



“disappearing Aboriginal world” in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, or Canada’s vast “empty” land, “typical” of Canadian landscape paintings and an important element of white Canadianness. Krieghoff “faced the lakes and virgin forest without prejudice, and uttered their colour and rhythm in forms so true that they still remain vital, despite the passing of time and the changing standards of art” (Barbeau, *Krieghoff* 32). The 104 works demonstrate this. Gallery 202 displays twenty-six portraits of First Nations people by Krieghoff. At the very east end of the Thomson Collection, a small, dark hall (Gallery 222) is dedicated to Indigenous art from North America, Africa, and Oceania, without much of a dedication to Canadian First Nations art. As no texts or captions appear in this hall, visitors would be hard pressed to identify the details of each work in the broad sampling.

In the west half of the Thomson Collection, visitors can see another large collection of landscape paintings: Gallery 216 has fifty-nine works by Tom Thomson (who inspired the Group of Seven); Galleries 208–210 have 160 works by members of the Group of Seven; and Galleries 211–214 have 114 works by David Milne, another white, male Canadian painter. With a vast collection of landscape paintings comprising most of the Thomson Collection of Canadian Art, visitors who expect to see the “core” of Canadian art are never disappointed.

The J. S. McLean Centre (Galleries 201 and 224–239) has three main themes (Memory, Myth, and Power) each trying to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of Canadian art and to represent women and historical First Nations art. Visitors will see many pieces by white Canadian artists, including members of the Group of Seven, though the works are represented in “new and dramatic ways” (AGO, *About*).

In the hallway-like Gallery 225, visitors find First Nations art from historical to contemporary periods, including Norval Morrisseau’s *Man Changing into Thunderbird* on the north wall. According to the text,

This gallery features ancient, historical and modern works by First Nations and Inuit artists. The works reflect 11,000 years of visual expression, tradition and memory. They reveal a past which continues to shape the future.

The exhibit includes stone tools and arrowheads from prehistoric periods, which denote memories, metals, and textiles with a European influence from the early seventeenth to the late-nineteenth century. The period from the late-nineteenth century to the early-1950s is denoted as the erasure period and tourist art, or works for collectors, such as argillite poles, birch bark, and beaded bags, are displayed to illustrate the survival of artistic expression. Here, words by



Louis Riel are quoted: “My people will sleep for 100 years, but when they awaken, it will be artists who will give them their spirits back.”

The period after the 1950s represents modernity, denoted as cultural revitalization with three works by Bill Reid displayed. Reid, Norval Morrisseau, and Zacharias Kunuk are introduced as artists who led new forms of expression. In Gallery 225, only one piece is owned by AGO with others on loan from the Royal Ontario Museum, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and the Smithsonian Institution.

Gallery 224 contains contemporary artworks, including two by First Nations artist Robert Markle. The exhibits in Galleries 227–239 are thematic. In Gallery 228, the juxtaposition of Anishnabe’s two pipe bags with Tom Thomson’s *West Wind*, or birch works with Emily Carr’s *Indian Church* are supposed to demonstrate the interrelatedness between First Nations art and European art, though the connection is difficult to decipher. Gallery 232 challenges the idea that the Group of Seven is representative of Canadian art:

Does the Group of Seven reflect your Canada?

The Group of Seven formed in Toronto in 1920. Today, their paintings are still among Canada’s most popular images. Each painting on the light grey walls was first exhibited in seven exhibitions of the Group’s work at the Art Gallery of Toronto in the 1920s. While the Group’s landscapes have become symbols of Canada, many in the art world have questions about the mythology that has developed around them. Are these landscapes a true representation of Canada?

In response to this question, this gallery offers the work of other artists who were active at the time of Group of Seven. Their work, presented on the dark grey walls, challenges the Group’s mythology by providing different perspectives on Canadian art and identity.

The artists presented on the dark grey walls include female artists such as Emily Carr, Dorothy Stevens, Liliass Torrance, and Sarah Robertson, along with Bertram Brooker and John Lyman, who were critical of the group’s nationalist approach. According to the text, however, all of these artists were overshadowed or inspired by the group. Thus, the style of the selected paintings is similar and the way in which these artists might have challenged the group seems less radical than that of other works, such as *A Group of Sixty-Seven*, by Jin-Me Yoon. She strategically located Asian-looking figures in landscape paintings by Lawren Harris and Emily Carr to raise the question, “Can I as a non-Western woman enjoy a naturalized relationship to this landscape?” (Manning). In this gallery, white Canadian artists are still dominant and white Canadianness is not critically challenged. In addition, because of the similar

styles of the artworks, the public would likely have no idea about the concept of the gallery hall unless they read the text. In a thirty-minute observation, I could easily see that only about one in ten visitors read the text.

**The subject of Gallery 233 is “Constructing Canada”:**

What images contributed to the construction of Canada? Painted views of landscapes illustrated books, photography albums, travel guides and First Nations objects all shaped the world's perception of Canada. These items were reproduced locally and abroad in every art form, perpetuating the mythology of Canada.

This gallery highlights three popular images of Canada. These scenes from Niagara Falls and Quebec, as well as objects and images from First Nations communities are often considered the cornerstones of Canada's identity abroad.

The First Nations artworks exhibited in this gallery include a Haida pipe and argillite carvings, Mohawk beadwork, and a Kahnawake Mohawk peace tree. The concept is interesting but why are only these images considered “the cornerstones of Canada's identity abroad”? Why is the gallery missing images of the Canadian Rockies, Anne of Green Gables, or the northern lights? Popular “Indian” images abroad are misappropriated as totem poles, feather dresses, teepees, and Wild West shows.

The subject of Gallery 238 is the establishment and questioning of power and the struggles inherent in power dynamics. The gallery displays a few First Nations artworks: Norval Morrisseau's *Shaman—Thunderbird*, a Haida mask (1870), Charles Edenshaw's totem pole (1924), and a Haida clan helmet (1840). Kent Monkman's *The Academy*, which uses parody in representing a complex relation between First Nations and white people, attracts guided tours and visitors, who are usually given the time to enjoy the work. In Gallery 239, the works represent “how Europeans—Euro Canadians have represented Aboriginal people” and “how Aboriginal people looked back at them in return.” Photographs by Edward Curtis and paintings by Edmund Morris and Paul Kane demonstrate a European's nostalgic view of Aboriginal people while Haida works such as *Sea Captain* (1840), *European Figure* (1880), or *Sailor Figures* (1945) represent an Aboriginal view of Europeans. The text explains that Aboriginal people created these works because they “were fascinated by the unusual appearance and clothing of Europeans” just as Europeans were fascinated by the “curios” of Aboriginal people. The concept of Galleries 238 and 239 is relatively easy to understand and the selection of artwork is good. Gallery 239 is the end of the Canadian art section.

Overall, visitors see a huge collection of landscape paintings and a few samples of historical First Nations artwork, with no texts in the Thomson Collection. Visitors can fully taste the “core” of Canadian art. In the McLean Centre, visitors again see landscape paintings along with First Nations artworks and works by women artists. The installations challenge the idea that only works by white Canadian artists are considered Canadian art. Many of the texts explain the curator’s views and give visitors a chance to reconsider the notion of Canadian art. Unfortunately, few visitors likely read the texts.

### **Is the New Canadian Art Section Successful?**

The AGO’s new Canadian art section is impressive. The 1447 works on display would satisfy most visitors, even if they missed the AGO’s other major collections, such as European and contemporary art. The huge number of landscape paintings in the Thomson Collection would fully excite “traditional” audiences. Some visitors’ comments are testimony to this:

[Morgan] Ip reserved his highest praise for the AGO’s Group of Seven collection. “They are spectacular paintings. I didn’t even realize how much talent Canada had,” he added. (Demara 2008)

[Writer James] Dubro said his favourite moment was being alone—briefly—in a gallery spaceloaded with great Canadian art. “The weirdest thing was being in a room—with a lot of great Canadian art—Paul Peel and all these other artists—with nobody else in the room. Alone with 100 extraordinary pieces of art,” he said (*ibid.*)

The core of Canadian art still appears to be dominated by works by white artists and the AGO’s new Canadian art section has really left the paradigm unchanged. The AGO is also tethered to the critique that Canadian art galleries still fail to include First Nations art adequately. The pieces of First Nations art displayed do not appeal to visitors, in comparison to the landscape paintings by white Canadian artists, especially in terms of their number. The majority of artworks in all galleries of Canadian art are landscape paintings by white artists. In particular, more than a hundred works in several gallery halls by Cornelius Krieghoff, the Group of Seven, and David Milne are the dominating representatives. Galleries 222 and 225 are specifically dedicated to First Nations artworks, with more than fifty on display, but the works are miscellaneous, from prehistoric stone tools to contemporary paintings (and video works) from various regions including North America and Oceania. Gallery 222 is also a small area, at the very end of the Thomson Collection, and Gallery 225 is no more than a hallway at first glance. Visitors are never surrounded by more than a hundred pieces of First Nations artwork by the same artist or group. If, for example, visitors could see a hundred pieces from the Woodland School

of Painting, spanning several gallery halls, they would be impressed to see a rich history of First Nations art, something not shown at the AGO.

Visitors may also be challenged to digest fully the concept of the McLean Centre. While not denying the significance of the concept, nor arguing that the public is not interested in some “difficult” interpretations of art, the texts are unappealing, like many of the selected works in the art gallery. In the Thomson Collection, the lack of texts (and even captions) freely allows visitors to interpret or enjoy each piece in their own way. Visitors are not told directly how to approach landscape paintings from a “professional” perspective, according to the curator. Instead, they can immerse themselves in this Canadian art world. Borrowing Roberta Smith’s words, the exhibition “contextualize[s] things in a way that might allow them to speak for themselves, or the viewers to think for themselves” (qtd. in Cuno 20). Meanwhile, in the McLean Centre, the thematic installments with many texts require visitors to see the artworks from a particular perspective. Of course, visitors can skip the texts and enjoy each piece as they might wish, however, “The exhibition favors labels that provide explicit, heavily biased interpretations, often putting words in the artworks’ mouths and then judging them accordingly” (ibid.).

The spatial arrangements are also challenging. Most visitors would start their tours from the Thomson Collection, as it is located at the front and close to the main stairs. The approximately 650 landscape paintings by white Canadian artists in the Thomson Collection are extremely impressive and visitors are immediately educated about Canadian art. The huge collection would easily satisfy visitors before they reach the McLean Centre. Likely, the majority of visitors would be too tired even to try to understand the concept of the McLean Centre by the time they get there. Visitors might wonder why works of the Group of Seven are installed in two separate galleries. A close examination of the Thomson Collection with its huge number of landscape paintings would weaken the appeal of the “new” display in the McLean Centre. McMaster argues that “history is less boring” at the McLean Centre (Art and Ideas) but visitors might be exhausted to learn history or the “different” view on Canadian art. When beginning a tour from the Thomson Collection, in my first visit to the new AGO, I was noticeably tired by the time I reached the McLean Centre two hours later. The spatial arrangement of AGO’s Canadian art section clearly emphasizes the notion that landscape paintings define Canadian art.

Although the AGO has included historical First Nations art, the appeal of such works is still weak. It is disappointing that the AGO did not radically challenge the dominant paradigm of Canadian art, even under the supervision of an authoritative First Nations curator, Gerald McMaster. The number of works and spatial arrangement of the Canadian art gallery reinforces the idea that white Canadian art is Canadian art, and constructs “Canadianness.” One could say that the AGO’s real achievement is not the gallery itself but the

decision to hire Gerald McMaster, with his experience at the Smithsonian Institution and the Canadian Museum of Civilization, to curate not only First Nations art, but the entire Canadian art department. Might the installations of art in the galleries of Canadian art been different if the AGO had hired someone else as curator? Might someone else have made the brave decision to limit the number of works from the Group of Seven?

Gerald McMaster once stated that “Aboriginal art histories continue to be treated independently of Euro-Canadian art history” and “There is a much more complex Canadian art history that needs to be told” (McMaster, *Our (Inter)* 5–6). Many others have suggested the same thing since the 1980s (e.g., Vastokas; Phillips, *Trading*; Jonaitis; Wright; Young; Jessup, *Landscape*). The AGO has made its shot, but the new Canadian art galleries still miss the mark.

### **Towards an Inclusive Canadian Art History**

Is there any practical means to change the representation of Canadian art drastically to include more First Nations works? I suggest that there is, but several issues need to be addressed. First, Canadian art galleries, including the AGO, need to increase the number of First Nations artworks in their collections significantly. This is a big challenge. The lack of a sizeable collection is partly related to the history of AGO acquisitions, as previously discussed, since its approach was to avoid overlap with anthropology museums. In addition, Canadian art galleries depend on donations of art to increase their collections. Most of the artwork donated have been works by white artists, except for a few examples of Inuit art. Although many Canadian art galleries are acquiring First Nations artwork, the size of their collections is not comparable to the number of landscape paintings accumulated before the 1950s (AGO, *Selected*). Many of the pieces of historical First Nations art currently on display at the AGO have been on loan from other institutions. Moreover, the history of collecting First Nations objects has worsened the situation, as the vast majority of collectors of eighteenth and nineteenth century works were British or European, and later American, who transported their collections to their home countries (Willmott 215–16). In the early-twentieth century, Canadian anthropologists such as Edward Sapir and Marius Barbeau considered First Nations historical art as “inauthentic” handicrafts, and they were thus overlooked from their collections. Moreover, First Nations are now claiming the repatriation of such pieces from institutions (Hamilton); therefore Canadian art galleries have little chance to increase historical pieces at present.

Under such circumstances, are collaborations with artists and reproductions of historical artworks feasible? Some anthropology museums (i.e., UBC Anthropology Museum) have already begun working in this area (Duffek and Townsend-Gault). In this way, First Nations artists will be able to join in the activities of an art gallery, acquiring new skills and reflecting their voices, while a large number of reproduced historical works can help the art galleries

create a “new” style of exhibition. Are there any ethical issues surrounding “counterfeits” in the art gallery? It does not seem that Canadian art galleries have yet started active discussions on this issue.

The next challenge is how to make space for the display of more First Nations pieces and how to convince “traditional” audiences, who prefer landscape paintings and may not be interested in First Nations art from the region (Lisus and Ericson). In the short-term, the AGO can remove some landscape paintings from two or three gallery halls to make room for Aboriginal artworks. For example, the Thomson Collection currently displays more than a hundred pieces by Cornelius Krieghoff and David Milne; however, such representation appears repetitive (Carson). McMaster indicated that the installations at the McLean Centre would be updated to attract repeat visitors from the Toronto area (Art and Ideas). Why not the Thomson Collection? And if such a change happens, how will “traditional” audiences react?

In fact the AGO recognizes that its European-focused collection targets the white upper classes, who are AGO’s traditional visitors. The AGO rarely receives visitors from the lower classes, who tend to feel unwelcome (Jonaitis 19). The AGO is also not a destination for First Nations (Thomas and Hudson 147). Lynn Hill raises many questions about the art gallery audience:

Is the audience Native or non-Native, and what is the difference between these two audiences? How can education and entertainment be used to challenge the fundamental beliefs of non-Native audiences who do not expect to have their fundamental beliefs challenged during a visit to the art gallery? Why would First Nations people want to visit a place where someone else is telling their story? How can we strike a balance between the disparate needs and expectations of our audiences? (178)

For the AGO, a radical change could be challenging and risky, but if it causes no loss in the number of visitors, why should it shy away from a “new” style of exhibition? Is the AGO afraid of being boycotted by its traditional visitors if it takes an “innovative” approach to Canadian art with a large number of First Nations artworks? Without such radical changes, visitors will not learn the interrelated Canadian art history between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

John Ralston Saul argues that art is never really a small step but is “something [non-Aboriginals] have to do with Aboriginals” (35). Referring to the *Art of This Land* at the National Gallery, he continues: art “is the sign that we are getting ready to think differently—that we are starting to imagine ourselves in another manner” (36). Art can demonstrate the possibility of constructing “another national history from another perspective and examining and changing the centre” (Young 205). For the AGO, the next step would be

to let the public understand that First Nations art is integral to Canadian art history. The rich history of white Canadian art needs be recognized, but it does not always have to be the centre. The AGO tried something new in 2008, but not all of the galleries

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