

A Place of Our Own

Re-examining the colonial paradigm of the museum structure by empowering northern indigenous artists

Written & Researched by Delia Chartrand



Acknowledgments

CRIAW acknowledges its presence and work on Indigenous Territories. We respectfully recognize the legacy of colonization upon Indigenous Peoples.

The University College of the North (UCN), Elder's Council meeting, was attended in Nelson House on April 22, 2015. As a commitment to the Aboriginal Art Centre for Northern MB's mandate and to show our dedication to working in partnership with First Nation's communities, it was incredibly important that we be present at this meeting before commencing with the study. An offering of tobacco was presented to the Council and various elders' comments and advice on how to improve the ethics of our study, potential contacts for interview as well as other matters related to the establishment of a future centre were heard. We would like to express our gratitude to the UCN Elder's Council for allowing us to present at this meeting.

The participants of this study who provided research support include:

Heather Bonner, Community Liason, Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre

Colin Bonnycastle, FemNorthNet University Network Member, Associate Professor/Director of Northern Social Work Program, University of Manitoba

Dr. Marleny Bonnycastle, Assistant Professor, Northern Social Work Program, University of Manitoba

Dr. Maureen Simpkins, Associate Professor, University College of the North

In addition to those instructors, organizers and research supports listed below there were 7 female Elders of the Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre and 1 male artist who participated in the group and individual interviews from which the body of data for this study has been derived. This study would not have been made possible without their insightful and innovative thoughts.

Furthermore the study would like to recognize the students of Maureen Simpkin's ANS 2100- Research Methods class 1 for their participation in focus groups which constituted this study's round of data analysis. Their participation and discussions added a unique perspective to the interpretation of this study's data.

Chris Bignell, Assistant Researcher, Executive Director, Thompson Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation

Organizational Partners:

Aboriginal Art Centre for Northern Manitoba Inc., Thompson, MB.

Thompson Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation, Thompson, MB.

Ma-Mow-We-Tak Friendship Centre, Thompson, MB.

University College of the North, Thompson, MB.

University of Manitoba, Northern Social Work Program, Thompson MB.

This study was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

ISBN: 978-1-894876-60-5

Suggested Citation:

Chartrand, D. (2016). *A Place of Our Own- Re-examining the colonial paradigm of the museum structure by empowering northern indigenous artists*. Thompson, MB: Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women, FemNorthNet.



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	2
BACKGROUND.....	2
KEY FINDINGS.....	4
RECEPTION TO CURRENT DISPLAYS OF INDIGENOUS ART	4
AUTHENTICITY	5
TRADITIONAL ACTIVITIES	6
TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE	7
CONNECTION TO THE LAND	8
ECONOMIC ISSUES	9
CULTURAL MESSAGE	9
CONCLUSION	11
REFERENCES.....	11

INTRODUCTION

The Aboriginal Art Centre for Northern Manitoba (AACNM) is a local Thompson organization governed by a Board of Directors, 60% of whom, are Aboriginal. They consist of members from various local grassroots and government organizations, as well as independent artists. The Mission of the AACNM is to be a Home for the Visual Arts: To Learn; To Inspire; To Create; To Grow; To Present; To Promote and To Celebrate.

The AACNM is dedicated to the expansion of the network of northern Manitoban artists through education and collaboration. AACNM is involved with the programming of various artistic as well as business workshops. They are committed to creating better opportunities in the north for artists to develop their skill sets through training and showcasing and are working towards the establishment of a physical arts centre in Thompson.

In the spring of 2015 the AACNM received funding through FemNorthNet to conduct a study which would guide the direction of the organization's actions in developing a centre. The purpose of this research was to develop an informed and original template for how to display and communicate the works of a prospective art centre in a more culturally relevant manner which expressed both the traditional and contemporary aspects of being Indigenous. The study explored the opinions of the Indigenous artistic community, specifically those of female artists and Elders by asking what they thought the centre should be.

The intended result of using this approach was to conduct a study which both generated knowledge to inform the art centre's direction, while also empowering the participants of the study by giving them a voice. In this way, the research gave Indigenous artists a platform to explore and discuss potential strategies for the display and dissemination of their art as well as ways of generating the best economic opportunities for northern artists.

This study was the culmination of an initial literature review, group and individual interviews and surveys, as well as focus groups conducted through the University College of the North. The study was originally intended to utilize a much larger sample group of participants from communities throughout northern Manitoba. However, as a result of several delays and the loss of additional supports the number of interviews was shortened to include a smaller group of eight Indigenous participants from Thompson, Manitoba.

BACKGROUND

The legacy of the art gallery or museum can be characterized as primarily a Western colonial construct.

“Museums, collecting, anthropology, and archaeology were developed within, and are deeply entrenched in, a Western epistemological

framework and have histories that are strongly colonial in nature. As with most contemporary fields of study, these areas of research and practice are fully steeped in Western ways of knowing, naming, ordering, analyzing, and understanding the world.” (Atalay, 2006)

Museums themselves have a long history of cultural appropriation of Indigenous artifacts, art and cultural items and while the idea of the museum as an establishment and how it functions has evolved over the years, its physical attributes have been altered very little to dissuade observers from its former purpose. (Frideres, 2011)

Historically throughout many colonial nations, the marketing and sale of Indigenous art has varied drastically over the centuries ranging from the trade of cultural items which Indigenous people actively and independently engaged in, to the stealing and appropriation of Indigenous art. The dissemination of Indigenous art was arranged through several different establishments throughout the period of the 20th century for many colonial nations. Trading posts as well as church run facilities offered spaces for the purchase and sale of Indigenous cultural items and art work. For example, in Australia the role of missionaries was to facilitate these arts and crafts enterprises as a way to introduce the concept of the cash economy into remote communities. These establishments were controlled by the missionaries, rather than the artists producing the works however, as a means of establishing this economy as well as displaying the success of the mission’s roles to protect and preserve the diversity of Aboriginal culture. (Altman, 2005)

In recent years scholars have observed many challenges in portraying Indigenous culture. One example is the reception of The National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI) exhibits. Here respondents were divided on the histories displayed throughout the museum with Indigenous observers stating that they felt the exhibits would not be compelling enough in terms of portraying the reality of challenges their communities faced, while non-Indigenous observers feared the exhibits would be too controversial.(Atalay, 2006) Conversely, in another case involving two specific artworks from the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver entitled, *Sanctuary* and *Even Though I am the Last One* which evoke powerful images of colonialism and cultural appropriation the pieces were deliberately displayed in Western spaces as a means of communicating their message. While they displayed uncomfortable content for both indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences the artists specifically chose the space of Western museums to incite reactions and acknowledgement from Western society. (Kramer, 2004)

Today there is an increase in the practise of collaborating with museums and the communities from which the exhibit’s items originate. This practise is hailed as one of the most significant developments in the modern museum and curatorial disciplines. (Peers & Brown, 2003) The idea of creating a post-colonial space within the museum by using multiple voices for displays of an organization is considered slow however, by modern scholars like Amy Chan (2013) who

describes the climate of the modern museum as, “A mix of exclusive elitism and inclusive democracy,” and explains that in order to break away from the colonial framework in which these institutions are entrenched, and develop themselves as a community governed institute, an increased effort to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue must be made.

Consequently, studies like Geoffrey Carr’s, “Atopoi of the Modern: Revisiting the Place of the Indian Residential School,” examine the transformative potential for the physical spaces of buildings in becoming colonizing agents through their architecture. (2009) With this in mind it is important to note the potential influencing effect of building design when considering the space of cultural centres and art museums.

KEY FINDINGS

The artists who participated in this study outlined some significant areas of importance to them concerning the display and dissemination of Indigenous art. These suggested areas of importance were then used to conduct a focus group consisting of university students which were asked questions with regards to these topics. Recommendations have been made based on the data supplied by both the interviews, surveys and focus groups’ suggestions.

Reception to Current Displays of Indigenous Art

The eight participants of this study were asked to reflect on their past experiences of seeing Indigenous art and culture in galleries, museums and other locations and discuss their thoughts on its presentation. On the matter of how items of cultural significance are displayed opinions were divided. Four participants felt that the displays of culture in modern museums and galleries was favorable, stating that they found exhibits interesting. One participant explained that the displays evoked memories of childhood and “growing up on the land.” Other comments referred to the diversity of culture in exhibits and how they enjoyed different aspects such as seeing beading, observing how people lived long ago, and learning about the different dialects of language spoken.

In contrast to this, three participants had a considerably more negative reception to museums and galleries. This group expressed concerns regarding the cultural relevance of galleries for Indigenous people and addressed issues of the dichotomy between Western and Indigenous frameworks. These participants explored the detrimental effects of misrepresenting Indigenous culture. On this subject, the following comments were made:

“Art galleries and museums display Indigenous culture and art as simply ‘for show.’”

“All the many art galleries and museums are firstly made for Western society (white) so First Nations don’t have a say at all. Western societies

pick and choose what will be displayed, disregarding the background of the item displayed. If there is a presentation about the artist, it is vague and the Indigenous culture is not well presented”

“I feel it hasn’t changed. Most Indigenous art has the same generic theme. A core objective of a museum or gallery is building bridges between cultures, so I feel that is sometimes missed in the display of First Nation’s art exhibits. When we consider these works and what they tell us it is hard not to see a parallel between the aspirations and questions of identity faced by First Nations.”

Additionally one participant expressed a mixed reception on the topic. While they felt that museums could be used as an important tool to teach younger generations about their history and the accomplishments of First Nations people they also commented,

“Lots of artifacts are stored and not seen. Some galleries and museums are too small [and] crowded. Group tours are too quick.”

The topic of Indigenous art was also explored in other contexts. It was noted that in many cases Indigenous art is displayed proudly in people’s homes and as murals in communities it is rarely defaced or vandalized. Participants felt that these were positive examples of how Indigenous culture is respected by mainstream society. In one case, an Elder recalled how a police officer from Norway House had bought mittens and mukluks from her and returned to tell her that he had hung them on his wall for display. She explained how she had told him that he was supposed to be wearing them and this story was met with laughter from her and the other Elders in attendance.

The general consensus on the display of Indigenous art however, was that it needed to be displayed in a way that is respectful and considerate of both the individual artist and the culture which it represents.

Authenticity

One of the areas which participants expressed concern for was the commercialization of Indigenous art. This was a resounding theme throughout the course of the study’s discussion as many participants talked about the authenticity of particular items marketed as Indigenous.

One Elder told a story about visiting a gallery in Winnipeg that had items that were made to look old. She explained,

“There was another gallery that I had to go and find and see if this was old stuff or if it’s being made to look like old stuff. They had the stuff and buried it... and made it to look old, but it wasn’t...They had hung it up in the sun.”

When asked how she felt about galleries which engaged in these types of activities and marketing the participant replied how this was not considered “professional art,” to her.

One participant felt that in order for art to remain authentic it needed to remain close to the place of its origins. They explained the concept of removing items from their primary cultural region saying,

“Some centres are distant from [their] place of originality. These centres [and] displays need to be...closer to their place of origin. I think this type of presentation does not actually contain any originality. It does injustices to the artists and the original Indigenous makers. Preservation of our culture; not commercialization.”

While these comments may contrast with other participants’ suggestions that an art centre needs to be inclusive to a variety of First Nation’s cultures, it reinforces (to some degree) other participants’ assertions that the lack of galleries in rural, northern communities needs to be addressed. This is because a local art centre could potentially reduce the need for northern artists to send their works to distant locations in order to have them displayed.

The prevailing rhetoric around this discussion signified the need for educational programming to combat the commercialization of Indigenous art. Participants suggested finding ways to teach audiences about the cultural significance of certain items. One idea was to,

“Educate and inform others that traditional items are sacred and not for sale, usually gifted...”

While another comment was to,

“Raise awareness, educate people about culture...it’s not a costume, its cultural appropriation and there are items that are considered as sacred.”

In addition to creating new avenues to educate the public with regards to Indigenous culture, another suggestion made was to give artists more control over their own art. This is an idea which would ensure that individual artists had agency to determine how their works were viewed and consequently to some degree, how they would be interpreted in a gallery setting. In turn, another participant added how allowing local artists to provide educational services as cultural teachers would not only be beneficial to the community, but empowering to the artist as well.

Traditional Activities

Another prevailing theme throughout discussions was the emphasis on traditional activities as an art in their own right. When asked what they thought constituted Indigenous art the majority of participants recognized Indigenous art to be far more expansive than physical items and finished products.

One example of this was the relevance Elders from the study placed on the traditional production of materials used to create items such as moccasins and mittens for their beadwork. There was a resounding concern with the Elders over the generational loss of knowledge on how to produce these materials. One Elder's comments encapsulate the discussion saying,

“You got to have something to start your art with, materials, and work on it, but then it's so expensive nowadays. You used to just go in the bush and if you'd killed whatever, [you'd] start making things. I know my grandmother used to do that. I asked my grandson, I said, 'Let's go in the bush so we can get some stuff,'....He didn't believe me.”

For many Elders participating in the study, the knowledge of how to tan hides and produce traditional materials is an art form which needs to be taught to younger generations before it is lost. Another participant commented on how learning these processes and traditional activities facilitates the traditional structures of education and illuminates former ways of life for a younger generation. This participant explained,

“The message is learning how to make the products...and for how hard life was, and learning from our parents.”

Here the recommendation was made to run workshops through an art centre that would teach the production of materials like canvas, paint, and tools in traditional ways by using items from the land such as hide, blood, goose feathers, horse hair and porcupine quills.

Traditional Knowledge

In addition to identifying the production of items from raw materials as a facet of Indigenous art, participants also indicated their perception of ceremony, as an art form. When asked what their experience of Indigenous art has been, several participants mentioned the ceremonies of storytelling, pow-wows and sweats as a significant aspect of Indigenous art. While tangible art forms such as painting, beadwork, structures, carvings, blankets, and clothing were all mentioned, the value of non-physical elements of culture cannot be understated.

Several Elder's indicated the need for a traditional room at the art centre where they could hold smudges, pray, visit, and teach others about traditional ways. Subsequently the need to have Elders play a significant role in the teaching process of the art centre was expressed by both Elders and younger participants alike.

Elders stated the following,

“The Aboriginal people, culture, and language will enrich the younger generation by understanding the richness of their culture... to see the

work and learn to do things [such as] beading, plant medicine, storytelling.”

“Our way is living with mother earth... the Elders could teach our young ones the traditional way of life.”

“Be mindful that an Elder [should] be present at all times at the centre.”

Likewise younger participants expressed their willingness to have Elders play a significant role in the function of an art centre, acknowledging them as reservoirs of cultural knowledge. When asked about the role Elders should play at an art centre, participants responded with the following answers,

“Storytelling, explaining the significance of what it means and the art of how to tell stories.”

“They know the culture and tradition, art and stories behind it. They know the significance.”

“They take the role of being teachers and how to explain things.”

These comments indicate that there is the willingness across the generational gap to reintroduce culturally relevant educational structures in an Indigenous art centre. The response generated demonstrates an eagerness from a younger generation to learn about the significance and meaning behind many aspects of their culture as well as a willingness from Elders to teach the younger generation how to carry on this traditional knowledge. Adopting such a teaching framework would allow an art centre to function through a traditionally Indigenous epistemology.

Connection to the Land

Another area of importance indicated by a majority of participants was the significance of the land to Indigenous cultures. Incorporating this into the display of art and situating the building in this environment was a topic which was explored by several participants.

One participant stated,

“I think a building like this should be in an open country free from any distraction of the city scene. Most people have become too comfortable with working in urban studios...A release from the noise and busy lifestyle can produce healthy and new experiences in general...a place where the art and the artist can say ‘This is where we all started on the land and the art followed us.’”

Other respondents agreed that the building should be placed close to nature, suggesting locations such as somewhere near the bush or overlooking a lake. Conversely, several Elders addressed concerns regarding accessibility to a

building located too far from the city or near highways and suggested areas closer to the downtown area in order to make it easier to visit. Based on these responses it is worth noting that providing travel to and from a centre built further from an urban location for people, specifically Elders, would be essential.

In addition to these issues raised, participants also suggested the need for the building to incorporate traditional and natural features in its design as well as its displays. Respondents offered ideas such as creating the building to look like a log cabin, a tipi, and to find innovative ways to, “bring the outside into the centre.” More than one respondent referenced incorporating the four elements into the centre’s design. Subsequently several participants suggested the centre utilize technologies such as solar paneling to go green and reduce the impact of an art centre on its surrounding environment.

Economic Issues

The main issue indicated throughout the study with regards to the economic issues involved in the production and dissemination of art was the cost and availability of materials. Several Elders raised concerns over how to afford materials for beadwork and sewing. They agreed that teaching the next generation how to produce these items from raw materials found in nature would allow them to secure materials for their work while carrying on an important tradition. Their discussion suggests however, that whether materials are harvested in nature or bought from a manufacturer, if the Elders were supplied with materials from the centre, this would be helpful. Other suggestions included providing a space for artists to sell their work at the centre, as one participant explained it is difficult to compete with the local stores to sell their work.

Cultural Message

One reoccurring theme throughout the discourse of this study was the concern over the recognition of individual artists and the cultural legacy of conveying their message. For example, one participant explained,

“I found that there [were] many artists making products like that years ago that they didn’t acknowledge. They just displayed it.”

Another participant talked about how many items are kept in storage and not available for public viewing.

In terms of ensuring that Indigenous artists are properly recognized for their works participants had several suggestions. Most significantly, attributing works to the artist by giving the public an intimate understanding of the individual who made it was suggested. Participants felt that the public should be made aware of the artist, where they came from, and their cultural background. One Elder explained how in order to understand the work a display needed to incorporate the cultural perspective of its creator stating,

“The art centre should embody respect, a deep understanding of all cultural aspects of making art. Cultural, traditional, belief and value systems, as well as an awareness of the history of all the makers and [the] hardships endured during the process of productivity.”

Another Elder responded similarly saying,

“Display of all art should be done respectfully and honorably. Also, a good understanding of the value system of all the artists should be made available and displayed.”

Other participants suggested including exhibits on the history of Indigenous peoples and the treaties from an Indigenous perspective. One participant explained,

“The canoe (birch bark) is an ancient form of transportation. Mainstream society neglect to mention the help of First Nations. Our museum will be unique to re-tell history in the First Nations perspective. If it wasn't for First Nations, [western] explorers would not [have made] it. This is our Kikinaw museum.”

In order to facilitate these types of displays participants suggested incorporating elements such as storytelling, touch screen, audiotapes, and storybooks in the display of art to give audiences a fuller understanding of the background of each work. Additionally, participants suggested the use of bilingual displays in English, Cree, and Dene to convey their cultural message.

Another important facet of communicating a cultural message suggested that an art centre should practice inclusiveness while celebrating the diversity of all First Nations cultures. This was an important factor for the majority of respondents, who stated the following,

“Art with integrity while remaining rooted in our own diverse Aboriginal cultures.”

“You get other people to bring their art there, to display it, and then that's the way it will take an art form.”

“Displays from other provinces...we want people to come in with their art too, with their work and [have] changing exhibits.”

“Everyone shall display their art. All artists welcome.”

These responses suggest that the art centre should be used as a meeting place for bringing together communities and diverse cultures and that inclusiveness should play a significant role in the facility.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study suggest that for most of the participants involved, the idea of Indigenous art is intrinsically linked to a broader understanding of traditional activities and cultural values. The significant areas of importance identified by respondents over a discourse on Indigenous art were questions of authenticity, traditional practices, traditional knowledge, the connection to the land, economic issues and cultural message. These issues are deeply entrenched in Indigenous cultural frameworks that cannot be separated from the discipline of art itself.

For the majority of participants Indigenous art expands beyond the confines of physical production to aspects of cultural activities and natural elements. Therefore, recommendations must be made to approach the discipline of Indigenous art and its display through a holistic lens which encapsulates all aspects of the individual and cultural contributors that design it. In doing so we must also adopt Indigenous epistemological frameworks to remain culturally relevant as educators of Indigenous culture and art.

The findings of this report will be presented to the Aboriginal Art Centre for Northern MB's board of directors in order to provide direction for how a prospective centre will look and function. Recommendations with regards to the types of workshops and programming as well as the paradigm for teaching to be employed there will be taken into account as the idea of the art centre is further developed. In addition, the general look and environment going into the construction of a centre will be reviewed in consideration to the comments made by the study's participants. An art centre for Thompson is still in its conceptual and planning stages therefore, it is imperative that we listen to the words of Elders and artists within the Indigenous community to develop a facility that embodies a culturally relevant message.

REFERENCES

- Altman, J. (2005). *Brokering Aboriginal art: A critical perspective on marketing, institutions, and the state*. Victoria Australia: Deakin University.
- Atalay, S. (2006). No Sense of Struggle: Creating a Context for Survivance at the NMAI. *American Indian Quarterly* , 597-618.
- Carr, G. (2009). Atopoi of the Modern: Revisiting the Place of the Indian Residential School. *ESC* , 109-135.
- Chan, A. (2013). Incorporating Quliaqtuavut (Our Stories): Bering Strait Voices in Recent Exhibitions. *Museum Anthropology* , 18-32.
- Frideres, J. S. (2011). *First Nations in the Twenty-First Century*. Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- Kramer, J. (2004). Figuritive Repatriation: First Nations 'Artists-Warriors' Recover, Reclaiming and Return Cultural Property Through Self-Determination. *Journal of Material Culture* , 161-182.
- Peer, L., & Brown, A. (2003). *Museums and Source Communities*. Routledge.

