

THE FUTURE OF MUSEUMS WHAT NOW? WHAT'S NEXT?



The Museums of the Future or the Future of Museums

Keynote speech to the Canadian Museum Association

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Creating Cultural Capital

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During the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) National Conference 2019, artist Brittany Datchko created a mural in real time based on what delegates thought the future of museums will/could look like.



GAIL LORD

President and Co-Founder, Lord Cultural Resources

I am delighted to participate in this CMA conference and to present this combination keynote and wrap up. As many of you know my late husband Barry Lord and I started Lord Cultural Resources 38 years ago and have worked in every province and territory of this beloved country plus 56 other countries. This has enabled me and my colleagues at Lord Cultural Resources to experience firsthand the challenges that museums large and small worldwide are experiencing in the global north and west and the developing south and east. Our challenges are remarkably similar and surprisingly so are our opportunities.



A word about this crazy photograph—it's me last week in Dubai visiting the Canadian consulate which offers the best view of the "Museum of the Future" which is in construction as you can see. What occurs to me, and I am sure that people will flock to this museum as they do to the one in Brazil, is what **Marshall McLuhan** might say: this is an example of the "rear-view mirror" —when you see something in your rear-view mirror, it is already in the past. So, while we can build "museums of the future", **the only way Museums can have a future is by building a future.** For me this means partnering with civil society organizations.

This conference has focused **on 5 key areas of challenge and opportunity** which I will address looking forward to the future of museums—because I have a strong belief that museums have a great future.

1. Reconciliation
2. Partnerships for creativity, innovation and inclusion
3. Collections growth
4. Core Funding
5. Human resources and technology

I will also point to **three strategic opportunities** that will lead to a stronger museum future:

- i. A federal museums policy
- ii. Outward-looking professionalism
- iii. Soft power and cultural diplomacy.

1. Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action

Let's start with what is the number one opportunity for Canadian museums. Inspired by Kent Monkman's keynote.

In the 94 calls to action by this exemplary Truth and Reconciliation Commission, there are 3 actions of direct relevance to museums and archives. Plus, many opportunities for museums to engage with all 94. Right now - this document is the closest thing we have to a national museum policy. Given that some of the greatest works in Canadian museum collections were ripped from indigenous communities and put into museums—with the purpose of subjugation and humiliation of indigenous people—we should commit ourselves to helping indigenous people recover their possessions from foreign as well as Canadian collections. I'd like to acknowledge Senator Pat Bovey—former director of the Art Gallery of Victoria—for her tireless promotion of the rights and contributions of indigenous people, their art and passage of Bill C-262 for Canada to support in law the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous people. And, I want to thank the Parliamentary Secretary for announcing at this conference support for Bill C-262 and funding for repatriation research.

2. Partnerships for creativity, innovation and inclusion

There has been a conscious effort at this conference to expand horizons and to recognize that “we can’t do it” alone (whatever “it” is). We have a long way to go: Nathalie Bondil Director of the Musée des beaux-arts in Montreal has created extensive partnerships in health care and education as have many of you in this room. However, museums need more if we are to have a great future. Museums actually cannot be creative, innovative or inclusive UNLESS we **partner with civil society organizations**. How many of you feel comfortable with the concept of civil society—these are organizations that are neither big government nor big business. It is the civil society organizations that are the building blocks of democracy: for example, cities and unions, housing societies, farmers and fishing cooperatives, education, hospitals and health care, indigenous organizations, black lives matter, environmentalists and tourism. This is not a once in a five-year strategic planning consultation, it’s about ongoing relationships.

Some of you are undoubtedly thinking, “**But museums can’t be all things to all people**”.

But I’m here to talk about the “future of museums” — so is the alternative to be “nothing to nobody”? Or a few things to a few people? **The future of museums needs to be: “more things to more people”**.

The reality is that museums are in the rear-view mirror business. Remember in the rear-view mirror “objects may appear closer than you think”. Is it a deforming mirror which shapes what we collect and interpret according to the outsized influence of sponsors and government? By creating civil society partnerships, museums can understand people’s diverse experiences and have a more balanced and relevant perspective. By working with homeless people, we do not become social workers, we simply become more relevant—and more welcoming as has, for example, the new Ottawa Art Gallery which is located across the street from a homeless shelter and regularly offers homeless people food as well as art in beautiful surroundings.

3. Collections Growth

The CMA conference has had a number of important sessions on the fact that museums need to change collections policies and procedures to:

- Be more relevant to the 21st century
- Save money on storage costs

- Continue to preserve our art, science and heritage
- Develop new forms of collection sharing

I was recently at a cultural summit in Abu Dhabi where the solution to this problem was said to be to put collections online in virtual reality. We in Canada have a lot of experience with this and it is fine as far as it goes. However, the big opportunity is to continue to preserve the past through the actual objects. If you have too many butter churns, there is doubtless a museum elsewhere in Canada (or in the world) who could use a butter churn. I was thinking about redundant landscape paintings—why not offer them on long term loan to a museum in Indonesia that has no “western art” at all and where people can learn about us.

4. Core Funding

This is certainly a big problem. Core funding from government for museums has dropped from 80% when I started in this sector to somewhere between 35% and 50% today. A further problem is that most federal funding is for projects—not for core programs and collections. I’d like to make some observations about this:

- The problem was made urgent to the Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage in 2018.
- Museums are better funded than other cultural sectors like performing arts—we are kind of fat cats and this in my view obligates us to be ever more outward looking.
- The benefit of this decline in core government funding is that museums in Canada and world-wide (facing the same problem) have developed a plural funding model which makes them more open to a plurality of voices
- The tragedy of this decline is that it has forced museums to move away from the ethos of our 1972 (and last museum policy)
- “democratization and decentralization” to a new mantra
- “monetization”

I would propose that “from democratization” to “monetization” in 50 years is a slippery slope that requires an urgent Federal Museum Policy.

5. Human Resources and Technology

More and more Canadians are loving museums and wanting to work in them. We have produced several generations of talented and highly trained and degreed museum experts including many of you in this very room. There was a time when young Canadians had the opportunity to lead large cultural organizations. The focus on monetization has made boards fearful of risking young and diverse leaders because they do not yet have a track record in “monetization”. I hope that the training funds announced yesterday will help prepare young people for big jobs and redress the balance between democratization and monetization.

On the subject of technology, I want to give the Canada Council a shout out for their new funding initiative—the \$88.5M digital strategy fund. I can say on the basis of my international experience that this is one of the most advanced in the world. We need a similar fund for Museums—urgently.

Now for the three big opportunities—without which Canadian museums will not have much of a future.

i. Federal Museums Policy

The descent from the 1972 policy of “democratization” to the 2019 reality of “monetization” is a sure-fire way for our once world-leading museums to continue to decline. CMA, with our new president and executive director, should lead in demanding a new museum policy for the 21st century. This Museums policy should address museum responsibility to return collections to indigenous people, equity in human resources, inclusion in museum practice and digital strategy as well tying core funding to performance standards.

ii. An outward looking Professionalism

I recently had a fairly disturbing experience in Toronto of trying to place a brilliant and award winning exhibition on Nelson Mandela designed and circulated by our new national museum The Canadian Museum for Human Rights. It was turned down by every Toronto large museum not on the grounds of cost, nor of timing, nor of size. Every director I spoke to gave the same reason “**Not a curatorial priority**”. I am hopeful that this exhibition will come to Toronto but it will be hosted by another type of cultural institution—one that does not have curators. Given the proud history of this city in fighting apartheid which is why Mandela made his first visit outside Africa to Toronto where he addressed 40,000 students at what was then Skydome and was

introduced by one of our great indigenous leaders. This speaks to me of the need for a more outward-looking form of professionalism that is being addressed at this conference. As a profession, we can and must do better to balance curatorial priorities with social responsibility.

iii. Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power



These two slides define the processes that are so important in our world today. Canada has a lot to give the world. Canada has a lot to learn from the world. Museums can certainly support our diplomatic and trade efforts by increasing intercultural understanding—by supporting restitution of collections and leading by example; and by collection sharing rather than collection monetization. Kent Monkman dared us to think about colonialism this morning. Colonies were robbed of their treasures. Outside our country and within former colonies that do not have art of other countries, why don't we take material from storage and place it on loan to marginalized museums in our own country and to the thousands of museums abroad where people hunger to see these works? In the realm of soft power Canadian Museums can set the agenda for cultural connectivity and exchange—these are relationships that will benefit museums and our audiences by providing access to art and artifacts from so many countries that were once home to Canada's new immigrants and will provide opportunities for art and artifacts from Canada to these countries.

I will close with the full rear-view mirror quote from Marshall McLuhan. It gives me a sense of optimism for the importance of museums and also provokes some feelings of humility.

"WE DRIVE INTO THE FUTURE USING ONLY OUR REAR-VIEW MIRROR"