Indigenous contemporary art in Canada: decolonizing representations and institutions.

Zoe Brabant

Christi Belcourt, *Reverence for Life*, 2013

M1 Management of Cultural Institutions
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Résumé

Ce mémoire de recherche a pour objectif d'analyser comment les arts visuels autochtones contemporains au Canada agissent comme une force décoloniale en refaçonnant les récits institutionnels et en remettant en cause les politiques étatiques de réconciliation. S'appuyant sur le travail d'artistes comme Norval Morrisseau, Kent Monkman ou encore Christi Belcourt, il montre comment ces artistes réinvestissent l'histoire autochtone et déconstruisent les mythes coloniaux. À travers une approche postcoloniale et des entretiens avec des conservateur·ices, et des artistes, ce projet de recherche retrace l'évolution de l'art autochtone, de sa marginalisation à sa reconnaissance dans les institutions culturelles nationales. Les artistes autochtones mobilisent une souveraineté visuelle et la satire pour subvertir les récits dominants, affirmant leur droit à l'auto-représentation et à la vérité sur la violence coloniale. Leurs œuvres incarnent la résistance et la résurgence, revendiquant identité et droits autochtones selon leurs propres termes. Parallèlement, cette étude critique la politique de réconciliation du Canada, révélant comment une reconnaissance officielle sans changement structurel peut perpétuer les dynamiques de pouvoir coloniales. À travers l'analyse d'œuvres ou d'expositions muséales, ce mémoire démontre que la décolonisation véritable requiert une transformation institutionnelle guidée par l'autodétermination autochtone. Ainsi, l'art autochtone contemporain s'impose comme un puissant catalyseur de critique sociale, invitant musées et publics à dépasser l'inclusion symbolique au profit d'un dialogue et de changements significatifs.

Mots-clés : art autochtone contemporain ; décolonisation ; réconciliation ; résistance ; musées.

Abstract

This dissertation examines how contemporary Indigenous arts in Canada serve as a decolonial force, reshaping museum narratives and critiquing state-led reconciliation efforts. Focusing on artists like Norval Morrisseau, Kent Monkman, and Christi Belcourt, it explores how their works reclaim Indigenous histories and challenge colonial myths. Through a postcolonial analytical lens, artworks analysis and interviews with curators and artist, the research traces the evolution of Indigenous art from marginalization to prominence in cultural institutions. Key findings show that Indigenous artists use visual sovereignty and satire to subvert dominant narratives, insisting on self-representation and truth-telling about colonial violence. Their art embodies resistance and resurgence, asserting Indigenous identity and rights on their own terms. At the same time, the study critiques Canada's politics of reconciliation, revealing how government recognition and absent structural change, can reinforce colonial power dynamics. By highlighting museum case studies and policy analyses, this research project demonstrates that genuine decolonization requires institutional transformation guided by Indigenous self-determination. In sum, contemporary Indigenous art emerges as a powerful catalyst for social critique and healing, urging museums and the public to move beyond token inclusion towards meaningful dialogue and change.

Keywords: Indigenous art; decolonization; reconciliation; resistance; museums.

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List of acronyms used in this dissertation

2SLGBTQIA+	Two-Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer / Questioning, Intersex, Asexual (plus other diverse sexual & gender identities)
ACI	Art Canada Institute
AFN	Assembly of First Nations
AGO	Art Gallery of Ontario
BC	British Columbia
CFI	Canada Foundation for Innovation (federal infrastructure-funding body; cited for MOA's 2010 renewal grant)
MMIWG	Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
MOA	Museum of Anthropology
MOV	Museum of Vancouver
NGC	National Gallery of Canada
NWAC	Native Women's Association of Canada
NWT	Northwest Territories (federal territory in northern Canada)
PNIAI	Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. (the 1970s "Indian Group of Seven")
ROM	Royal Ontario Museum
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UBC	University of British Columbia

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Content note: This dissertation examines works that depict colonial violence. In particular, Section III A.3 discusses Kent Monkman's Hanky Panky (2020), a satirical painting containing sexually explicit imagery and references to sexual assault. Readers who may find such material distressing are advised to proceed with care and to skip page 70 if necessary.

Introduction

Context and definition of terms

Throughout my academic journey, I have been consistently drawn to the intricate connection between art and power, particularly the role of art as a tool of resistance against dominant systems and models. This interest led me to study the strategies and logics employed by subaltern groups, nurturing my interest in the study of the dynamics between the dominant and the dominated, and the mechanisms of subversion. An understanding of art as inherently political, influenced by thinkers like Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall, further solidified this direction. Their concepts of "cultural hegemony" and "counter-hegemony" resonated deeply with the use and power of subaltern art as a tool for political resistance.

Early interest in visual arts allowed me to link politics and the notion of representation and identity. Quite unexpectedly, my exchange year in Canada provided a perfect context to delve deeper into these interests. The importance of the "cultural field" in the Bourdieusian sense, and the role of art and representations in the balance of power, particularly in the context of recognizing the rights of Indigenous peoples, became a focal point of my study. I was initially struck by the reality of Indigenous peoples in Canada (at least, the closest I had ever been), which starkly contrasted the representations that had shaped my imagination since childhood in France. But this discrepancy fueled my curiosity, critical thinking, and reflection. It was during this period, attending cultural and Indigenous studies at the University of Wilfrid Laurier in Waterloo[1], that I was introduced to Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz's book *All the real Indians died off and 10 other myths*, which profoundly awakened me to these issues. These Indigenous studies courses invited me to deconstruct the narratives and representations ingrained in me since my youngest age through films, books or even at school, and is still a deconstruction I'm working on. Visits to numerous museums and institutions, such as the National Gallery of Ontario, Musée des beaux-arts of Montreal, or the Vancouver Art Gallery, where Indigenous arts were exhibited, also contributed to teach me about this subject as they invited me to go beyond the representations I had about Indigenous peoples. This experience of reconsideration resonated with the vision of the author of the graphic novel *C'est le Québec qui est né dans mon pays*, Emanuelle

[1] Located on the Haldimand tract, traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. This land is part of the Dish with One Spoon Treaty between the Haudenosaunee and Anishnaabe peoples.

Dufour. Visual culture courses during the same academic year complemented and echoed the themes explored in my Indigenous studies classes and *vice-versa*. At the intersection of these fields, I found a compelling continuity for my academic pursuits. The idea of focusing on this subject for my *mémoire* emerged naturally, allowing me to further explore and contribute to this discourse. As I plan to work in a cultural institution with a political and international dimension, I'm convinced this issue is omnipresent and I must understand the challenges as I'd like to work in the cultural field. This research project, therefore, represents a culmination of my academic interests and experiences, offering an opportunity to deepen my understanding of the complex interplay between art and culture, politics, through the question of representation and identity. Thus, I had to quickly acknowledge to renounce to some aspects of the subject due to settings such as distance and time, which do not allow me to cover them all in depth.

As the choice of the words of the subjects matters, here is the explanation of their meaning. The term "Indigenous" explicitly refers to the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples in what is now known as Canada, whose diverse cultures, traditions, and histories predate colonization. Indigenous art, within this research, therefore, encompasses visual creations produced by Indigenous artists that actively engage with, express, or reflect upon their identities, cultures, and lived experiences, thus asserting cultural sovereignty. By highlighting "Indigenous contemporary art," this dissertation specifically targets artistic practices that have emerged in recent decades, often characterized by hybrid forms and experimental approaches which directly respond to, interact with, or critique contemporary social, political, and cultural contexts. The concept of "decolonizing representations and institutions" is central as decolonization in this context does not only signify the removal of colonial power structures but represents an ongoing, critical process aimed at challenging, dismantling, and ultimately reshaping colonial narratives, stereotypes, and power relations embedded within cultural representations. Art becomes a powerful medium through which Indigenous artists contest and reclaim the narratives imposed by a colonial gaze, thereby asserting their own voices and visions. The geographic focus "in Canada" situates this study explicitly within a national context characterized by a specific historical trajectory: Canada's colonial legacy is not merely historical but ongoing, embedded structurally and culturally in contemporary institutions and societal frameworks. Thus, although the term "postcolonial" is commonly employed in academic discourse to signify contexts after colonialism, this dissertation consciously emphasizes the Canadian situation as inherently colonial rather than

postcolonial. In fact, Indigenous communities continue to experience colonial oppression through systemic racism, cultural appropriation, economic marginalization, and ongoing disputes around sovereignty and land rights. Employing a colonial framework rather than a strictly postcolonial one more accurately captures the persistent dynamics and tensions that Indigenous artists confront.

The current situation of Indigenous peoples in Canada reflects a complex landscape of socio-cultural and political struggles, marked by significant challenges and ongoing issues. Latest statistical findings from the 2021 census show that Canada has a population of over 1.8 million Indigenous people, accounting for 5% of its total population (Bush, 2025). This demographic includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples, each with their unique histories, languages, and cultural practices. The Indigenous population is growing rapidly, almost twice as fast as the non-Indigenous population, and is notably younger, with 41.2% under the age of 25. Indigenous peoples in Canada face a range of socio-economic challenges. In terms of health and socioeconomic challenges, Indigenous communities face higher rates of alcoholism and homelessness compared to the non-Indigenous population. A report by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness highlighted that Indigenous peoples are also significantly overrepresented in Canada's homeless population. Moreover, educational attainment and employment opportunities for Indigenous peoples lag behind the national average. According to Statistics Canada, the employment rate for Indigenous peoples aged 25 to 54 was lower than that of non-Indigenous people in the same age group. Educational challenges are linked to factors such as lower funding for schools in Indigenous communities and the lasting impact of historical education policies. Housing conditions are another critical issue, with almost one in six Indigenous people living in dwellings needing major repairs and 17.1% living in crowded housing. Furthermore, Indigenous people have higher rates of unemployment and incarceration, and they experience poorer health outcomes compared to the non-Indigenous population. The Indigenous population also faces higher levels of poverty, with 18.8% living in low-income households (Indigenous Corporate Training Inc.). Violence against Indigenous women and 2SLGBTQIA+ people also remain a significant concern in Canada. The Human Rights Watch report highlights ongoing discrimination and violence against these groups. A staggering 81% of Indigenous women who have been under foster care or other child welfare services have been physically or sexually assaulted in their lifetime. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) examined the systemic causes of violence against

Indigenous women and girls in Canada, indicating the severity of this issue (Lee, 2023). In terms of human rights concerns, Canada has faced criticism for failing to address issues such as safe drinking water on First Nation reserves. Despite promises and efforts, there are ongoing challenges and gaps in fully addressing the needs and rights of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Issues like inadequate housing, lower education levels, higher rates of unemployment, and increased levels of incarceration, intergenerationnal trauma, among Indigenous peoples persist. These socio-economic disparities reflect the lasting impacts of historical and systemic discrimination against Indigenous communities.

The cultural genocide experienced by Indigenous peoples in Canada is widely acknowledged and has been a subject of extensive examination, particularly in the context of the Indian Residential Schools and the Sixties Scoop. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), launched in 2008 as part of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, has played a role in documenting and addressing the tragic experiences of residential school students. The commission's final report in 2015 labeled the residential school system as a form of cultural genocide, highlighting that these schools were part of a coherent policy to assimilate Indigenous peoples against their will. Another significant aspect of this cultural genocide is the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG), which concluded in 2019. This inquiry used the term 'genocide' to characterize the pattern of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada, arguing that federal government policies and programs were intent on destroying Indigenous Peoples. The MMIWG inquiry's findings and recommendations have been influential, leading to changes in national narratives and policy discussions regarding Indigenous peoples in Canada.

These challenges reflect deep-rooted historical and systemic inequalities, underscoring the need for continued efforts toward the improvement of living conditions for Indigenous peoples in Canada. The Canadian government's response to the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples is multifaceted and ongoing, primarily centered around the TRC and its 94 Calls to Action. These actions span various areas including child welfare, education, language and culture, health, justice, and history. Each of these sectors reflects an effort to address the long-standing issues and injustices faced by Indigenous communities in Canada

In the context of this research project on contemporary Indigenous art in Canada, the field of Indigenous Studies, as part of North American Studies, plays a role when viewed through the lens of Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the "field". Bourdieu's idea of the field

refers to a system of social and professional settings where agents and their social positions are located. Indigenous Studies, within this framework, represents a significant realm where discourse and power dynamics around Indigenous histories, cultures, and issues are constructed, contested, and disseminated. It provides a critical space for the exploration and understanding of Indigenous perspectives and experiences, which are essential for comprehensively interpreting Indigenous art. This field not only encompasses academic scholarship but also intersects with political, social, and cultural dimensions, thereby influencing how Indigenous issues are perceived and addressed in broader societal contexts. In this research, this field will represent a cornerstone as a foundational element for analyzing contemporary Indigenous art, offering insights into the historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts that shape the creation and interpretation of this art. It also highlights the importance of acknowledging and integrating Indigenous methodologies and epistemologies in academic research, which is essential for a respectful and accurate representation of Indigenous art and artists.

Regarding postcolonial studies, this field is integral to the framework of this following research project, especially in analyzing contemporary Indigenous art within a postcolonial context. Postcolonial Studies offers critical insights into the enduring impacts of colonialism on cultures, societies, and identities. This field provides theoretical tools to understand how colonial histories continue to influence present-day power structures, identities, and cultural expressions. In the context of Indigenous art, Postcolonial Studies helps in deconstructing the colonial narratives and legacies that have historically marginalized Indigenous voices. It enables a critical examination of how Indigenous artists use their art as a form of resistance against and commentary on these colonial legacies. This field also sheds light on the processes of hybridity, negotiation, and cultural exchange that occur in postcolonial contexts, enriching understanding of the complexities and nuances in Indigenous art. By applying postcolonial theory, it can be interesting to analyze how Indigenous art challenges, reclaims, and redefines notions of identity, culture, and history that have been shaped by colonial experiences, making it a potent *medium* for expressing Indigenous perspectives and asserting sovereignty and cultural resilience.

State of the art

Therefore, this research project necessitates a nuanced state of the art that critically engages with a diverse array of literature and debates. Central to this discourse is the historical and cultural context of Indigenous art, where scholars like Ruth B. Phillips delve

into the evolution of Indigenous art forms, shaped by a complex interplay of traditional practices and colonial influences. This leads to debates around the representation of Indigenous histories, balancing the portrayal of historical trauma and cultural resilience. In the realm of postcolonial theory, foundational thinkers such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said offer insights into the impacts of colonialism, sparking discussions on how these Eurocentric theories intersect with North American Indigenous experiences. Methodological considerations in Indigenous studies, particularly the integration of Indigenous epistemologies, as argued by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, raise questions about research approaches. This ties into ongoing debates about cultural appropriation versus appreciation in art, examining the fine line between cultural exchange and appropriation. The role of art as a *medium* of resistance and identity is another key area, with Indigenous artists using their work for cultural reclamation, while scholars debate the implications of labeling art as "Indigenous" and its potential marginalization in the global art market. Museum studies also play a critical role, especially considering the historical position of museums as colonial spaces. Authors like Andrea Witcomb scrutinize the shifting role of museums towards more inclusive representations, among debates on exhibition practices and the balance between cultural context and commodification. Audience interpretation and engagement with Indigenous art, influenced by varying cultural backgrounds, are explored, with theorists like Stuart Hall providing frameworks for understanding reception, yet highlighting the complexity of ensuring Indigenous voices are not overshadowed.

Frantz Fanon's seminal analyses in *Black Skin, White Masks* and *The Wretched of the Earth* delve deeply into the psychological and cultural impacts of colonialism, providing a framework for understanding the role of Indigenous art in the processes of psychological and cultural liberation. His emphasis on the necessity for the colonized to reclaim their identity and culture is especially relevant in studying how Indigenous artists use their art as a form of resistance, challenging colonial narratives and reclaiming their heritage and identity. Fanon's influence extends significantly into postcolonial studies, positioning Indigenous art not merely as an aesthetic expression, but as an active force in the fight against colonial oppression and for self-determination.

Complementing this, Glen Sean Coulthard's insights in *Red Skin, White Masks* critically assess the ongoing colonial relationships in Canada, particularly how these are sustained not only through coercion but also through influencing Indigenous people's self-perceptions and aspirations. Coulthard's critique of the politics of recognition is particularly

vital; he argues that seeking recognition can sometimes perpetuate a colonial relationship, a concept that is essential in understanding the complex ways Indigenous art interacts with, and often challenges, recognition from colonial institutions. Through Coulthard's lens, Indigenous art emerges as an act of self-affirmation, a means for Indigenous peoples to assert their distinct identity, culture, and rights in opposition to assimilative and marginalizing structures. Integrating the thoughts of Fanon and Coulthard, the research could thus engage deeply with themes of decolonization, resistance, and the reassertion of Indigenous identities. Their theories provide a nuanced understanding of the power dynamics involved and highlight the role of Indigenous art as a critical tool in challenging these dynamics, articulating Indigenous worldviews, and contributing to broader socio-political movements for Indigenous autonomy and recognition.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, best known for her seminal essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, explores the limitations and challenges faced by marginalized groups in having their voices heard and acknowledged within dominant cultural discourses. Her focus on the subalterns - those outside the hegemonic power structures - aligns closely with the themes of this research, especially in understanding how Indigenous artists navigate and challenge these structures through their art. Spivak's theories on representation and the politics of voice provide a critical lens for examining how Indigenous art serves as a *medium* for expressing complex identities and narratives that have been historically suppressed or overlooked. Her ideas encourage a deeper consideration of how Indigenous art can both confront and transcend colonial narratives, offering a space for genuine self-representation and dialogue. Additionally, Spivak's emphasis on the importance of acknowledging and deconstructing the intellectual and cultural biases inherent in Western epistemologies is particularly relevant. It invites a critical examination of how Indigenous art can challenge and redefine traditional Western artistic canons and expectations.

Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz, an American historian worked on Native Americans history. Some of the aspects can be applied to some extent in the Canadian context. The work in the book cited above can be a relevant example to understand how myths are institutionalized in society and how to deconstruct them. Her emphasis on a decolonized view of history and her critique of the persistent colonial structures in North America can deeply inform the understanding of the context in which contemporary Indigenous art is created and received. Dunbar-Ortiz's exploration of the legacy of colonialism, including the dispossession of land

and suppression of Indigenous cultures, offers a critical backdrop against which to examine Indigenous art. Furthermore, her focus on the resilience and resistance of Indigenous communities provides an empowering context for interpreting Indigenous art. Dunbar-Ortiz's narratives underscore the agency of Indigenous peoples in shaping their histories and futures, a theme that is often vividly expressed in Indigenous artwork.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, particularly their critical theory as developed in the Frankfurt School, offers a valuable theoretical lens for my approach. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002), and the critiques of culture, capitalism, and mass media provide a framework for understanding the complexities of cultural production in a modern, often commodified, world. Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the "culture industry" can be useful as they argue that in capitalist societies, culture becomes commodified and loses its ability to be truly revolutionary or critical of the *status quo*. Applying this here, it can help to understand how Indigenous artists navigate and resist the commodification of their culture and art forms in the mainstream art market. Furthermore, Adorno and Horkheimer's focus on negative dialectics, which emphasizes the importance of understanding objects or phenomena without reducing them to broader concepts, can be applied in appreciating the unique and intrinsic value of Indigenous art. This approach can help resist the tendency to oversimplify or generalize Indigenous experiences and artistic expressions, acknowledging the diversity and complexity within them.

Homi Bhabha's study on the role of institutions and intermediaries and their dynamics in *The Location of Culture* employs notions like mimicry, interstice, hybridity, and liminality to assert that cultural production thrives in areas of ambivalence. Bhabha articulates his ideas with intellectual clarity, underpinned by a conviction that theoretical understanding can drive practical political transformation. His approach suggests that the most significant cultural developments often occur in spaces of complexity and uncertainty. He explores how marginalized cultures can resist and subvert dominant narratives. Contemporary Indigenous art in Canada can be seen as a means of resisting and challenging colonial representations, as well as promoting a reclaiming of control over Indigenous identity and culture.

Françoise Vergès views the museum as a site of political claims, and an inherently colonial entity. The museum becomes a place for negotiating identities. She envisages a

society that would overcome this colonial legacy and invites to reflections and alternatives with the idea of constructing counter-narratives. Vergès discusses the need to decolonize museums, which have often served to perpetuate colonial narratives by contributing to the fabrication of imaginaries. This can be linked to contemporary Indigenous art and how it can contribute to transforming and redefining traditional cultural spaces, like museums, by highlighting Indigenous perspectives and stories. She also addresses the politics of memory in museums, which can be relevant for examining how contemporary Indigenous art interacts with and reshapes collective memory in Canada, especially regarding Indigenous histories and experiences that profoundly question the existence and roots of the Canadian State. Vergès emphases on the equitable representation of marginalized cultures in museums can be transposed to the study of the visibility and representation of Indigenous art in the Canadian artistic landscape. Her work highlights the importance of giving Indigenous artists a platform to tell their own stories. Vergès is interested in how museums can serve to rewrite or challenge historical narratives, particularly through the drafting of counter-narratives. Similarly, contemporary Indigenous art in Canada can be seen as a means of challenging and revising colonial history through visual and artistic counter-narratives.

As for the visual analysis of art pieces from Indigenous contemporary artists in Canada, Incorporating the theories of Roland Barthes and Stuart Hall into this research offer a comprehensive framework for the complex communication of meaning through these artworks. Barthes' semiotic theory, as elaborated in his work *Mythologies*, provides a powerful tool for deconstructing the layers of signs and symbols embedded in Indigenous art, allowing for a deeper understanding of how these pieces convey intricate cultural, historical, and political narratives. His concept of 'The Death of the Author' further enriches this analysis, suggesting that the interpretation of an artwork is shaped significantly by the viewer, thus opening up diverse perspectives and meanings independent of the artist's original intent. Complementing Barthes, Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model offers an insightful approach to understanding how Indigenous artworks are created, presented, and interpreted within different cultural contexts. This model allows for an exploration of the potential for varied interpretations based on the viewers' cultural backgrounds and frameworks. Additionally, Hall's work on cultural identity and representation in a postcolonial context provides a critical lens for examining how Indigenous art represents and constructs cultural identities, challenging dominant narratives and contributing to the formation of a distinct Indigenous identity. By synthesizing the insights of Barthes and Hall,

the analysis can delve into Indigenous artworks not merely as visual entities, but as complex communicative acts embedded with layered meanings. This approach will enable to explore how these artworks function as a dynamic interface between the artist, the artwork, and the audience, participating in a broader discourse on identity, history, and power in a postcolonial setting. It offers a nuanced perspective on the interaction between Indigenous art and its audiences, highlighting the role of art in shaping and reflecting cultural narratives and identities.

Research question

This dissertation is guided by one central question:
To what extent does contemporary Indigenous art in Canada serve as a tool for political resistance and cultural affirmation in a postcolonial context?

The first part focuses on Indigenous representation and the ways in which it challenges colonial narratives still present in Canadian society. It begins by tracing the historical evolution of Indigenous art, from traditional forms to its recognition within the contemporary art scene. It then turns to the question of the colonial gaze, examining how artists like Kent Monkman (Fisher River Cree Nation) and Norval Morrisseau subvert imposed narratives and reclaim visual sovereignty. This section also considers how contemporary artworks participate in the deconstruction of stereotypes, and how they affirm Indigenous cultural identities through both thematic content and aesthetic strategies.

The second part centers on the figure of the artist, not only as a producer of images, but also as a cultural agent, curator, and strategist. It examines how Indigenous artists actively contest myths and assigned roles, reposition themselves within (and beyond) dominant discourses, and navigate the social and economic ecologies of the art world.

The third part explores the reception of Indigenous art in institutional and public spaces. It investigates how museums and cultural institutions mediate these works, the tensions between inclusion and co-optation, and the evolving strategies used to decolonize curatorial practices. This section also analyses audience engagement, questioning how different publics interpret Indigenous works, and highlights the potential of exhibitions to act as spaces of resistance and counter-narrative within or despite institutional frameworks.

Research hypothesis

The research hypotheses for this study on contemporary Indigenous art in Canada are grounded in several key assertions. Firstly, it suggests that this art form challenges and subverts colonial narratives, acting as a platform for resistance against historical and ongoing cultural suppression and political marginalization. Indigenous artists are hypothesized partly to use their art as a means to reclaim and assert their cultural identities and spiritual beliefs, which have been historically undermined by colonial practices, thereby contributing to the revitalization and preservation of Indigenous cultures and languages. The work of contemporary Indigenous artists is believed to reflect the socio-political realities and challenges faced by Indigenous communities, encompassing social issues. Additionally, Indigenous art is thought to play a role in educating and engaging non-Indigenous audiences, fostering cross-cultural understanding and aiding in the process of reconciliation. This art serves as a bridge, promoting dialogue and mutual respect between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous communities. Another hypothesis is that the reception and dissemination of Canadian Indigenous art at the institutional level reveal the flaws in the reconciliation policies promoted by the Canadian government between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous peoples. Indigenous art is also considered instrumental in the healing process for communities affected by colonial trauma, providing a space for expression, reflection, and connection, thereby empowering both artists and audiences. The influence of globalization and modern artistic techniques, which have also permeated Indigenous art in Canada, is hypothesized to have transformed it, potentially leading to new forms of expression that blend traditional and contemporary elements while maintaining cultural authenticity. Finally, the study hypothesizes that the museum, inherently a colonial institution and part of a wider system, can be reimagined as an alternative space. The presence of Indigenous art in museums, historically a symbol of colonial dominance, is now seen as a platform for Indigenous artists to challenge and redefine narratives, transforming these spaces into places of cultural assertion and resistance. This shift in the role of museums reflects a broader change in the way Indigenous art is perceived and engaged with in contemporary society.

Research method

In my research project, the inquiry protocol is specifically based on the analysis of Indigenous artworks, employing a comprehensive approach that integrates several critical components. The core of the research involves an in-depth examination of the production and dissemination processes of these artworks, exploring how the artists' cultural, social,

and political contexts influence their creative processes. This analysis is essential in understanding the nuanced ways in which Indigenous artists express their identities and experiences through art. The study places significant emphasis on the personal and professional journeys of the artists, delving into their backgrounds, artistic evolution, and the various influences and motivations that drive their work. This artist-centric approach is essential to gaining a deeper appreciation of the context and meaning embedded within their art. A key aspect of the protocol is the reception analysis of these artworks by diverse audiences. This involves scrutinizing how different groups interpret and engage with Indigenous art, and the broader implications these interpretations have for our understanding of Indigenous issues and identities. The visual analysis of the artworks themselves forms a foundational part of the research methodology. This involves a detailed examination of elements like composition, color, symbolism, and technique, with a grounding in art theory and criticism. Additionally, the research incorporates the sociology of reception to analyze how viewers interact with and perceive Indigenous art. This viewer-centric approach helps in understanding the artworks' impact and significance from the perspective of diverse audiences, considering their cultural and social backgrounds. Finally, the research will also focus on the role of institutions, such as museums and galleries, in shaping the presentation and perception of Indigenous art. This includes an examination of how these institutions support or challenge the narratives and representations of Indigenous peoples.

Due to the geographical distance separating me from the field, I had to reconsider the methods through which I could access relevant materials and perspectives. I therefore relied primarily on archives, primary documents, and visual analysis of works by various Indigenous artists, which form the core of this research. To compensate for the lack of direct immersion, I conducted interviews with exhibition curators and, when possible, artists themselves, in order to better understand their objectives and viewpoints. This approach, though logistically challenging, due to factors such as time zones and physical separation, allowed for meaningful exchanges. Notes and observations gathered during my academic year in Canada, as well as the travel notebook I kept during that period visiting museum, proved to be valuable sources of insight. I also made efforts to physically reconnect with Indigenous artistic content by looking closely at events such as the Festival Paroles Autochtones and Midis Poésies in Brussels, where I met Carole Labarre and Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau. I also visited the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris. I had the opportunity to engage in dialogue with several key figures: Franck Miroux (Université de

Pau), curators Bernard Lamarche and Eve-Lyne Beaudry (Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec), Karen Duffek (Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver), and Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau, a Cree artist who is also a curator and writer.

While this research does not claim to be exhaustive, I have chosen to focus on three contemporary artists whose work directly challenges inherited representations, stereotypes, and colonial myths. Through their art, they confront both viewers and institutions with narratives that demand critical reflection and deconstruction. The decision to highlight the works of artists Norval Morrisseau, Kent Monkman, and Christi Belcourt aims to reflect a diversity of artistic approaches, themes, and strategies within contemporary Indigenous art. Their practices provide meaningful insights into how art can actively interrogate colonial histories, disrupt dominant narratives, and contribute to wider conversations about identity, resilience, and cultural resurgence.

Norval Morrisseau

Norval Morrisseau, *Shaman and* Disciples, 1979

The first Indigenous artist I'd like to introduce is Norval Morrisseau (1931-2007), also known as Copper Thunderbird, who was from the Anishinaabe Nation. He is considered the "grandfather of contemporary indigenous art in Canada" (Robertson, 2016) and he was a member of the Group of the Seven; he has deeply shaped the Indigenous art history in Canada. Scholar Carmen L. Robertson has worked on Norval Morrisseau biography and artwork. Her analysis can shed light on how Norval Morrisseau's work has been received and interpreted across different cultural contexts, contributing to a deeper understanding of cross-cultural dynamics in art reception. The main aspect will be to analyze to what extent his art responds to a colonial gaze, and what does it reveal about the society. In the meantime, it can be interesting to focus on how Norval Morrisseau's art can be exhibited in the same place (museums) as colonial representations. It will lead to a reflection on the role of

museums in the phenomenon of decolonization and the process of integration of his work in such institutions. Morrisseau's art can be seen as a form of resistance against colonialism and a tool for empowerment. His use of traditional Anishinaabe imagery and symbolism also challenges the colonial narratives and asserted Indigenous presence and perspectives. Also, I'd like to discuss the way people assigned him stereotypes and how his image influence and is perceived bas his background can reinforce stereotypes of Indigenous people in Canada, especially relating to social systemic issues like, in other words, how cultural assumptions framed Morrisseau himself.

Kent Monkman

Kent Monkman, *Seeing Red*, 2014

Another relevant study case could be the artist Kent Monkman. He is of Swampy Cree, English and Irish descent and a member of the Fisher River Cree Nation in Manitoba. S. Madill and her biography of the artist will be very helpful for this research. By using his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testicle, he often incorporates themes of gender fluidity, drawing from the Indigenous concept of Two-Spirit identity[2]. This challenges Western binary notions

[2] Two-Spirit identity: translation of the Anishinaabemowin term *niizh manidoowag*, refers to a person who embodies both a masculine and feminine spirit. (The Canadian Encyclopedia)

of gender and highlights the diversity and complexity of gender identities in Indigenous cultures. By reimagining iconic Western artworks, Monkman invite viewers to reconsider the stories and histories these works represent, particularly from Indigenous and marginalized perspectives. This subversion is a direct challenge to the Eurocentric norms and narratives prevalent in the art world. Monkman's work often includes potent commentary on colonial history, Indigenous experiences, and current social issues like residential schools, cultural genocide and intergenerational trauma. Their art become a platform for dialogue and education about these topics. Both personal especially visible through self-representations, and cultural history influences their work, offering a deeper understanding of his artistic motivations and messages.

Christi Belcourt

Christi Belcourt, *This Painting is a Mirror*, 2012

Finally, Christi Belcourt's art, renowned for its intricate environmental and spiritual themes, holds significant relevance to this research on contemporary Indigenous art in a postcolonial Canadian context. Her work, celebrated for its beadwork-like depictions of natural landscapes, exemplifies a profound connection with nature, integral to many Indigenous worldviews. Belcourt, through her art, engages in environmental advocacy,

highlighting issues related to land rights, resource extraction, and environmental degradation, directly linked to the larger discourse on the impact of colonial practices on Indigenous lands and ecosystems. This environmental focus is intertwined with her commitment to preserving and promoting Indigenous spirituality and cultural practices, using traditional motifs and patterns, thereby contributing to the reclamation of Indigenous identity in a postcolonial era. Belcourt's approach blends modern techniques with traditional Métis and Anishinaabe beadwork, creating a compelling narrative on the evolution and resilience of Indigenous art forms. Her work transcends cultural boundaries, engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike, fostering dialogue and education about environmental and cultural issues. Beyond her artistic contributions, Belcourt is also actively involved in political activism, particularly advocating for Indigenous rights and environmental conservation. Her engagement in these areas provides a critical context to her artwork, adding layers of meaning and relevance. Her focus on contemporary challenges faced by Indigenous communities, such as climate change and the struggle for sovereignty, along with themes of healing and empowerment in her art, underscores the significance of her work in the context of the reflection of Indigenous contemporary art in a post-colonial setting. Thus, Christi Belcourt's art not only reflects aesthetic richness but also serves as a powerful medium for advocacy, education, and cultural and environmental consciousness.

Structure

This dissertation is structured into three main chapters, each examining a distinct but interrelated dimension of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada. The first chapter explores Indigenous representation and its role in challenging enduring colonial narratives in Canadian society. It begins by outlining the historical evolution of Indigenous art, tracing significant movements and highlighting the emergence and recent transformations within contemporary Indigenous artistic expression. It then critically examines how contemporary artists, such as Kent Monkman and Norval Morrisseau, have reclaimed visual representation, shifting from dominant colonial perspectives towards powerful acts of self-representation. This chapter also addresses how contemporary Indigenous art reshapes cultural stereotypes and affirms cultural identities through distinctive themes, techniques, and mediums. The second chapter focuses on the artists themselves, considering their roles as agents of identity reclamation and cultural resistance. It analyzes how Indigenous artists challenge colonial myths, adopt the roles of curators and cultural strategists, and navigate social and economic contexts in their artistic practices. The third chapter investigates the reception and

institutional frameworks surrounding Indigenous art. It critically assesses the roles museums, galleries, and public institutions play in shaping the perception and recognition of Indigenous artworks. This includes an exploration of audience engagement, institutional inclusivity, and the strategies artists and curators deploy to decolonize exhibition spaces. Through case studies of artists like Kent Monkman and Christi Belcourt, as well as institutional collaborations such as those at the Vancouver Museum, this final chapter examines whether and how exhibitions and museums can effectively become sites of resistance and genuine allies in the broader process of decolonization.

I. Indigenous representation: challenging the colonial narratives in Canadian society

Focusing on the intersection of aesthetics and politics, this section traces how Indigenous art in Canada has emerged as both cultural expression and a strategy of decolonization, charting its trajectory from colonial marginalization to critical recognition and exploring how visual expression challenges, subverts, and reclaims the stories told about Indigenous peoples. While Indigenous visual traditions have existed for millennia, their entry into the Canadian contemporary art field has been shaped by a history of misrepresentation, systemic exclusion, and cultural appropriation. Museums and cultural institutions long framed Indigenous works as anthropological artefacts rather than as art in its own right, reflecting the broader colonial logic that sought to confine Indigenous peoples to a static past. Against this backdrop, Indigenous artists have not only preserved traditional forms but also radically redefined what counts as contemporary art. Movements such as the Northwest Coast Renaissance and the emergence of the Woodland School marked key moments in this transformation, bringing forward new visual languages grounded in Indigenous worldviews. Both movements emerged as forms of cultural resurgence and political resistance, aiming to reaffirm Indigenous identities, knowledge systems, and artistic practices in response to colonial erasure and institutional assimilation. Through a postcolonial lens, these artistic developments reveal the enduring power dynamics embedded in aesthetic categorization, the politics of visibility, and the colonial gaze. At the same time, the representation of Indigenous art within institutions raises questions about how meaning is constructed and interpreted. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of encoding and decoding (1980), this section also considers how Indigenous artists actively encode cultural, political, and spiritual meanings in their work; meanings that are not always understood or received as intended within settler-dominated institutions. As Hall argues, meaning is not fixed by the producer but is negotiated by audiences within particular cultural and ideological contexts. In the case of Indigenous art, this process of negotiation is often shaped by **lingering** settler-colonial assumptions, institutional framing, and the unequal distribution of **interpretive authority**. By examining the historical evolution of Indigenous art and its growing presence in galleries, collections, and public discourse, this section sheds light on the complexities of institutional recognition, cultural sovereignty, and visual resistance in a society still grappling with the legacy of settler-colonialism.

A. Historical trajectory: the evolution of Indigenous art in Canada

Collecting, erasure and "primitive art"

From the colonial era through the twentieth century, Indigenous visual culture in Canada was largely suppressed, marginalized, or recast as ethnographic "artifact" rather than recognized as art. In the early 1900s, Northwest Coast carvings and paintings were collected by anthropologists and displayed in museum basements as curiosities of "vanishing" cultures (Robertson, 2016). This reflected what Quijano calls the coloniality of power, in which Western epistemologies and hierarchies of knowledge remained dominant long after formal colonial rule, treating Indigenous creations as primitive crafts (the old "art/culture" binary that Clifford critiques) rather than as living cultural expressions. As Gerald McMaster notes, by mid-century curators began to apply modernist formalism to Indigenous objects, accentuating their aesthetic forms at the expense of context (McMaster, 2020), and to physically move them "from the dusty halls of ethnography to the pedestals of the art gallery". But even this partial reframing carried tensions: as Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse observes, formalist display often floated these works "adrift from ties to territory or chiefly privilege". The shift in classification was new and uneven. Indeed, when the Royal Ontario Museum finally purchased paintings by Norval Morrisseau in 1972, its curator admitted it was *"the first time"* the ROM had acquired contemporary Indigenous art and confessed uncertainty "where to place them" underscoring how foreign the concept of "Indigenous art" still was to institutional norms.

Revival movements and cultural renaissance

Mid-century changes in policy and activism began to alter this trajectory. Kwakwaka'wakw carver Ellen Neel forcefully argued at a 1948 conference that "Native art was a 'living art'" intrinsically linked to ceremony, declaring that without ceremonies like the potlatch, "the art withered and died". Her plea helped lifting the potlatch ban[3] in 1951, after which many communities consciously revived carving, mask-making and print workshops. By the 1950s and 1960s Northwest Coast culture was in a renaissance of revived practice: totem poles, masks and especially printmaking (more portable and saleable) re-emerged for a broader public (Stewart, 2023). Indigenous artists and supporters celebrated

[3] The potlatch, a ceremonial feast central to many Northwest Coast Indigenous cultures, was banned by the Canadian government from 1885 to 1951 as part of assimilation policies targeting Indigenous cultural and political life.

this revival as cultural renewal. Yet leading Indigenous thinkers cautioned against the trope of "rediscovery". For example, activist George Manuel (secwépemc) observed that the label "Renaissance" was misleading an "illusion created by the press and public institutions" that actually ignored the continuity of Indigenous resistance and artmaking. In other words, the appearance of new life in the 1960s was built on foundations laid by generations before.

Pioneering figures and institutional tensions

Simultaneously, particular artists and movements were catalysts for wider visibility. On the Pacific Coast, Haida artist Bill Reid (Iljuwas) began exhibiting Haida-style carvings and jewelry, bridging his formal art training and ancestral knowledge. Reid and curators worked within formalist discourse to elevate Northwest Coast form to "universal" art status, making works by master carvers like Charles Edenshaw appear as fine art. In 1967 Reid helped design pieces for Canada's Centennial even displaying his gilded *Eagle and Bear Box* in the Canadian Pavilion rather than the Indigenous pavilion (McMaster, 2020). By 1979 he received the Order of Canada, as a clear indicator of symbolic recognition.

Meanwhile, in the Great Lakes region, Ojibway painter Norval Morrisseau pioneered what became known as the *Woodland School*. In the 1960s Morrisseau developed a bold, generative style of acrylic painting full of Anishinaabe cosmology and vibrant color (Robertson, 2017). Along with contemporaries like Daphne Odjig, he galvanized an informal movement. In 1971 Odjig founded the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc. also known as the "Indian Group of Seven", explicitly to promote Indigenous artists and shift public perceptions. Prior to this, Indigenous visual work was largely confined to ethnology or tourist craft outlets, "mythologized as 'souvenir' art" in anthropology displays, rather than shown in mainstream galleries. The PNIAI organized its first exhibitions in the early 1970s (in Winnipeg, Montreal, even London, England) to assert Indigenous agency in the art world. Morrisseau's own work was subsequently featured alongside emerging peers in major shows: notably a 1984 AGO exhibition *"Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of the Image Makers,"* which explicitly described him a "trailblazer" of the Woodland School. This era saw Indigenous art entering fine-art spaces, yet not without friction. As McMaster notes, galleries and museums often struggled to categorize these works: multiple institutions that purchased Morrisseau's paintings confessed they did not know "where to place" them. Morrisseau had thus revealed the absurdity of art-world gatekeeping: despite acclaim, his success was constantly problematized by non-Indigenous frameworks.

Recognition and politics of inclusion

The late twentieth century witnessed both greater visibility and lingering colonial legacies. By the 1970s and 1980s, prominent Native artists (Morrisseau, Reid, and others) were included in international exhibitions like Expo 67 or the *Magiciens de la Terre* show in Paris, university collections, and even high-profile commissions. Yet postcolonial theorists remind us this recognition can be double-edged. What Coulthard terms the politics of recognition suggests that admittance into official histories may reproduce settler power unless it is accompanied by real authority and material change. Indeed, Morrisseau's own story illustrates this precarious status: despite early fame he struggled with alcoholism and was sensationalized by media only to be subsequently neglected again by the mainstream press. In this light, Spivak's notion of epistemic violence is apt: the dominant narratives often continued to silence or distort Indigenous ways of knowing in art : for instance, by categorizing sacred iconography as mere folklore. Similarly, James Clifford has warned against the rigid art/culture binary that traditionally consigned Indigenous creativity to "primitive art" (Nakamura, 2012). In our interview curator Bernard Lamarche acknowledged that a Beaux-Arts label can be "potentially the most colonial notion imaginable" yet insists that incorporating beadwork or perlage "pulls us decisively out of that too-narrow groove". His remark exemplifies how traditional techniques, once sidelined as "craft," now trouble Eurocentric taxonomies. The very effort to "reclassify" Indigenous objects as art was, from some Indigenous perspectives, ambivalent, a form of cultural independence and praise on one hand, but also a strategy of suppression on the other, as it sanitized these objects of their embedded meanings.

Today's museums show the legacy of this history. Many institutions have made visible commitments to inclusion and even decolonization, featuring Indigenous languages on labels, repatriating items, and hosting community-curated exhibitions. But interviewees caution that such measures often remain superficial. As Franck Miroux notes, settler institutions can slide into theatrical inclusivity, adding bilingual signage and high-profile artworks, chiefly to "absolve [themselves] of a certain burden" of colonial guilt. When inclusion is a gesture rather than a power shift, it risks empty symbolism. He insists that true change requires deferring to Indigenous authority: "everything" to do with exhibiting Indigenous art "should be done in concertation with the communities concerned," since "they are the ones habilitated to decide what can be shown and what cannot". This perspective highlights the tension between visibility and control: Indigenous people may become more visible in galleries, but often on the museum's terms.

Curator Bernard Lamarche echoed this finding in our interviewed. He observes that only from the 1960s onward did Canadian institutions begin to "question [Indigenous peoples] from their culture" rather than simply suppressing or assimilating them. Importantly, Lamarche describes a paradigm shift in collecting. He and his colleagues now try to *"create holes"* in the museum narrative, deliberately acquiring works that unsettle the traditional canon, instead of filling presumed gaps in the collection. This approach gestures toward deeper decolonization: not just adding Indigenous artworks into existing frameworks but rethinking those frameworks altogether.

The historical trajectory of Indigenous art in Canada, then, is a story of gradual inclusion shadowed by enduring coloniality. Early institutional exclusion and objectification gave way to partial recognition and celebrated movements (Northwest Coast revival or the Woodland School), led by figures like Reid and Morrisseau. Yet as Coulthard and others argue, symbolic inclusion without structural change can perpetuate colonial power. In each era, from potlatch prohibition, through Expo 67, to recent gallery practices, tensions have persisted between giving Indigenous art a platform and allowing it genuine agency. Contemporary debates about repatriation, curatorial control, and the purpose of the museum reveal that the "rightful place" for Indigenous art, to recall Neel's word (McMaster, 2020), is still being renegotiated on more equitable terms.

B. Examining the colonial gaze

Speaking back to ethnographic visions

For much of Canada's history, Indigenous peoples were portrayed through a colonial gaze: images by non-Indigenous artists, anthropologists, and institutions that reflected settler myths and power relations. Early ethnographic exhibits and paintings often froze Indigenous subjects in an imagined past or as "noble savages," denying them agency or modern presence. These dominant narratives cast Indigenous peoples as passive subjects of history, frozen in a mythic past or as tragic victims of progress. The *colonial gaze* denied Indigenous voice; as Gayatri Spivak would phrase it, the *subaltern* (the colonized) was not allowed to speak for themselves, only spoken *about*. Indeed, Spivak's provocative question *"Can the subaltern speak?"* highlights how the colonizer's frameworks silenced Indigenous voices even when Indigenous people attempted to articulate their own reality.

In the visual arts, *can the subaltern paint*? Early on, if Indigenous artists created works, they were rarely seen in mainstream forums, and colonial artists' depictions filled the void with stereotypes. By the mid-20th century, however, Indigenous artists began to *speak back* to these representations. They effectively answered Spivak's question by seizing the visual languages of power and using them to assert self-representation. As Franck Miroux observes, minorities "are not silent, they are silenced". Their voices go unheard or unheeded until they find a way to demand attention. Contemporary Indigenous artists found that way: through subversion and parody of colonial imagery, they force the viewer, often a settler audience, to confront the biases in those historical narratives.

Parody as decolonial strategy

Contemporary Indigenous artists have boldly intervened in this visual discourse, reclaiming the right to represent themselves and even reframe canonical artworks from a decolonial perspective. A celebrated example is Cree artist Kent Monkman, who has built an international reputation by subverting 19th-century colonial imagery. As Frank Miroux mentioned it in the interview, Monkman's paintings and installations directly parody works by artists like George Catlin, who painted "noble Indians" for Euro-American audiences, and other colonial-era painters. Monkman's pastiches of Catlin's scenes **lay bare** the artificiality and bias of those original paintings. By humorously indigenizing these iconic images, he exposes how the "West was won" visuals were staged inventions, and

simultaneously re-centers Indigenous experience and resilience. Such acts of visual reclamation turn the colonial gaze back on itself, forcing viewers to recognize the distortions in dominant historical narratives.

By appropriating the "authoritative language" of history painting (large-scale oil on canvas with a dramatic composition) Monkman's art carries a weight that commands the viewer's respect, even as it undermines the colonial pretense. His paintings like *"Welcoming the Newcomers"* (2019) hung in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Great Hall, literally entering the pantheon of high art that once excluded Indigenous voices (Griffey, 2019). In this monumental diptych, he portrays Indigenous figures as active participants greeting Europeans and people of African descent cast ashore, with Miss Chief centrally orchestrating the scene. The companion piece *"Resurgence of the People"* depicts Indigenous peoples surviving and thriving despite colonization Such works directly challenge the old canvases that showed colonizers "civilizing" passive Natives. Monkman's subversion is both aesthetic and political: he uses humor, eroticism, and anachronism to indict colonial history for its myths. In doing so, he demonstrates a powerful act of self-representation. The Indigenous artist reclaims the narrative brush.

Emanuel Leutze, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, 1851

Kent Monkman, *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People): Welcoming the Newcomers*, 2019

Kent Monkman, *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People): Resurgence of the People* (2019)

Asserting cosmology through Woodland style

Beyond parody, Indigenous artists use self-representation to assert sovereignty over their images and stories. Norval Morrisseau's legacy can be instructive here. Working outside European artistic traditions, Morrisseau developed a style that drew from Anishinaabe sacred lore and aesthetics, defying the categories that Canadian critics tried to impose. As Gerald McMaster argues: *"Anishinaabe artist Norval Morrisseau worked outside the established traditions of European visual culture and on occasion used his art to*

make forceful political statements. He defied categorization and challenged conventional understandings of Indigenous art. Although the media judged him harshly for his alcoholism and his traditional beliefs, such as shamanism, Morrisseau succeeded in raising awareness of Indigenous aesthetics and cultural narratives as he developed an artistic vocabulary that inspired a new Canadian art movement. […] He insisted that his vividly symbolic paintings were fine art and belonged in galleries, not just in anthropological displays. Morrisseau and his peers directly challenged colonial perceptions that Indigenous art was only "craft" or artifact; his career "succeeded in raising awareness of Indigenous aesthetics and cultural narratives" in the broader art world" (McMaster, 2020). Notably, Morrisseau infused his work with political commentary on colonization. For example, he referenced the trauma of residential schools or the erosion of Indigenous spiritual practices under the Indian Act: *"Works like Moose Dream Legend, 1962, were hailed as both primitive and modern by critics at the time. Morrisseau's work demonstrated clear links to the oral narrative traditions of the Anishinaabe in its process and its focus on animals and spirit-beings, but also commented on how 150 years of the assimilationist policies of Canada's Indian Act, which included residential schooling, had visibly erased Indigenous issues and understandings from Canadian public life.* Curator Gerald McMaster has described Morrisseau as "a latter-day neoprimitivist" because modern art had rejected all referents to things old or expressly cultural while it celebrated primitivism as a universal muse to the modern" (McMaster, 2013).

Norval Morrisseau, *Moose Dream Legend*, 1962.

The late Norval Morrisseau, in a different fashion, challenged colonial representations by asserting Indigenous cosmology on his own terms. Morrisseau's legacy lies in how he brought Anishinaabe stories and spiritual perspectives into a realm that had excluded them. Whereas Monkman dialogued with European art conventions, Morrisseau created a new visual vocabulary, "the Woodland School style", grounded in Ojibwe iconography with characteristics like circles, interconnecting lines, animals and spirits, yet contemporary in execution. In the 1960s, at a time when Canadian galleries scarcely acknowledged living Indigenous artists, Morrisseau's vividly colored canvases of shamans, thunderbirds, and sacred legends boldly contradicted the colonial narrative that Indigenous culture was dying out or purely historical. He once said that the purpose of his art was to "teach": to share the truths of his people's worldview with both Indigenous youth and settler society (McMaster, 2020). By painting the "new view of shamanism" that fused Anishinaabe and personal spiritual insights, he directly refuted Church and government efforts that had labeled such knowledge as primitive or pagan. In other words, Morrisseau's very subject matter was a challenge to colonial representations that either ignored Indigenous spirituality or portrayed it as superstition. This was radically empowering in a society whose narratives had long depicted Indigenous people only as minor characters in Europeans' stories.

Norval Morrisseau, *The Gift*, 1975

Morrisseau also indicted colonialism more directly in some paintings. One politically charged piece, *"The Gift"* (1975), shows a white figure handing a contaminating substance (alcohol) to an Indigenous figure (Robertson, 2016), a stark visual critique of colonizers' "gifts" that brought harm. Such works confront the viewer with the Indigenous side of the colonial encounter, an implicit counter to idyllic scenes by earlier artists where Indigenous people gratefully received European benevolence. Morrisseau's success (he became one of Canada's most lauded artists, with a major National Gallery retrospective in 2006) opened

doors for Indigenous self-representation in art. He mentored younger artists and proved that one could depict Indigenous *epistemologies* (ways of knowing) within modern art, effectively normalizing Indigenous perspectives as part of Canada's contemporary art narrative.

Counter-narratives and the "third-space"

Together, Monkman and Morrisseau exemplify two strategies of reclaiming the image of Indigenous peoples: reversal of colonial imagery and assertion of Indigenous worldview. Monkman's approach is often a direct parody that makes the colonial gaze itself the object of ridicule, forcing a reckoning with how absurd or violent that gaze was. Morrisseau's approach was to bypass the colonial lens entirely by foregrounding Indigenous sacred knowledge. Both strategies reshaped Canadian artistic discourse. They carved out space for Indigenous narrative sovereignty, where Indigenous people represent themselves, whether by speaking back to the colonizer or by speaking among themselves in a public forum.

By reclaiming agency in the portrayal of history and culture, Indigenous artists have expanded the national consciousness. No longer could Canadian art history courses skip from European settler art to multicultural postmodernism without acknowledging the foundational and ongoing Indigenous presence. Now, discussions of Canadian art must deal with works that criticize colonization, that present alternate histories, and that highlight Canada's colonial violence, such as the legacy of residential schools, a recurring theme in many Indigenous artists' works. For instance, Monkman's painting *"The Scream"* (2017) depicts Mounties and priests ripping Indigenous children from their mothers, representing a direct artistic confrontation with the residential school era that challenges viewers to acknowledge this atrocity, countering decades of silence or euphemistic treatment of the subject in Canadian public imagery. Such artwork pushes Canadian discourse beyond comfortable narratives of peaceful settlement or benevolent nation-building. It injects what Homi Bhabha might call "counter-narratives" into the national story, creating what Bhabha terms a "third space" of enunciation where the marginalized speak and the dominant must listen.

Kent Monkman, *The Scream*, 2017

In theoretical terms, these artistic interventions resonate with Frantz Fanon's analysis of the colonized intellectual's trajectory. Fanon observed that initially the colonized creative may imitate the colonizer's style, but eventually they return to their roots and then fight using culture as a weapon. Monkman's journey reflects this: trained in Western art, he delved into Cree history and finally turned the tools of Western art into a weapon of critique against colonialism. Fanon also spoke of the importance of reclaiming a distorted self-image; colonization implants an image of the colonized as inferior or deviant (what Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* described as the black man under the white gaze feeling "othered"). Through art like Monkman's and Morrisseau's, Indigenous people re-represent images of themselves as powerful, complex, and present. It's what Fanon considers a reclaiming of self-definition, a necessary step in decolonization.

Spivak's question "Can the subaltern speak?" is answered here with a visual twist: *the subaltern can paint, sculpt, and film, and how.* But Spivak also warned that even when the subaltern speaks, will the hegemonic structures listen or distort that voice? Indigenous artists anticipate this challenge by mastering the languages the dominant culture does listen to (oil painting, museum installations, ...) and then embedding Indigenous voice within them. It's a form of communication that forces the dominant culture to pay attention on its own

institutional system. This can be linked to what Franck Miroux describes as Indigenous artists *"seizing the centers of power"* and reappropriating them to decolonize discourse. By doing so, artists enact what Spivak might call *strategic mimicry*: adopting the appearance of the master's discourse only to subvert it from within.

Another case in point is how Indigenous filmmakers, like Alanis Obomsawin or Jeff Barnaby, and photographers have similarly flipped the colonial gaze in their mediums, telling stories from Indigenous perspectives and debunking stereotypical imagery. But staying with visual art, there are countless other examples like Marianne Nicolson's projection of Kwakwaka'wakw symbols onto BC's legislature, challenging that seat of colonial power. Each of these is an Indigenous creator taking back the representation of their identity and history.

Self-representation in art has become a decisive tool for challenging colonial narratives. By engaging parody, irony, and reclamation, artists like Monkman turn the colonial gaze back on itself, revealing its biases and absurdities. By creating new visual narratives grounded in Indigenous worldviews, artists like Morrisseau invalidate the old trope that Indigenous cultures are relics of the past. Together, they and others reshape Canadian artistic discourse, making it more truthful and inclusive. They illustrate that art is not only about aesthetics but is deeply entwined with power: who has the right to depict whom, and how those depictions influence public perception. As the colonial gaze is met with an Indigenous gaze, sharp, unflinching, and creative, Canadian society is prompted to re-examine the stories it has told itself. The next section will delve further into how these reclaimed images actively challenge stereotypes and prompt new understandings among the public.

C. Art's role in reevaluating cultural stereotypes

How art reshapes commonly held stereotypes

Stereotypes of Indigenous peoples in Canada have ranged from the tragic victim to the stoic warrior, the mystical shaman to the silent s*[4], often dehumanizing and simplifying a multitude of distinct nations into a single *cliché*. Mainstream media and education perpetuated many of these tropes, either casting Indigenous people as victims of history or erasing them entirely from modern narratives. Visual art can be considered a tool to confront and disrupt these stereotypes. By presenting powerful imagery of Indigenous resilience and complexity, artists invite both Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewers to reevaluate rooted perceptions.

One major stereotype that needed dismantling was that of Indigenous peoples solely as helpless victims or tragic figures. While acknowledging the very real suffering caused by colonialism, Indigenous artists have been careful to also portray the strength, agency, and survival of their communities, a concept Anishinaabe scholar Gerald Vizenor calls survivance, mixing survival and resistance (Vizenor, 2008). For example, Kent Monkman's alter ego Miss Chief is deliberately empowered: she is not a victim, but more like a trickster who controls the narrative. Through Miss Chief's interventions in historical scenes, Monkman challenges the stereotype of Indigenous peoples as defeated relics of the past. Miss Chief is confident, and in command, upending the colonial fantasy of Indigenous peoples vanishing or assimilating: "Monkman tells the story from the point of view of the colonized, and through his provocative pairings of paintings with museum objects, he upends representational practices that are common in museum displays. Through Miss Chief, he exposes and ridicules structures of patriarchy, racism, and colonialism" (Madill, 2022).

Another pervasive stereotype is the image of Indigenous women as either drudges or exotic maidens, almost never as contemporary figures with voices. This dehumanization has especially consequences, as seen in the crisis of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW). Art has played a major role in making this crisis visible to the public and reframing Indigenous women not as invisible victims, but as cherished and powerful members of their

[4] The term *squaw* is a nineteenth-century English distortion of several Algonquian words for "woman." It has been widely used as a racial and gendered slur and is now recognized as derogatory. I follow current scholarly practice by suppressing the full word in the main text while citing it here for clarity and to acknowledge its harmful history.

communities whose absence is a searing wound. The REDress Project by Métis artist Jaime Black illustrates this by its installation. Hundreds of empty red dresses are hung in public spaces, on building facades, in trees, along campuses, each dress symbolizing an Indigenous woman who is missing or was murdered. The vivid red color and the ghostly emptiness of the dresses create a shaking visual that forces onlookers to acknowledge both absence and presence: the women are absent in body but powerfully present in spirit through materials, through a symbol. As Black explains, the project *"draw[s] attention to the gendered and racialized nature of violent crimes against Aboriginal women"* and *"evoke[s] a presence through the marking of absence"* (Indigenous Foundations). The REDress Project has traveled across Canada, confronting communities with the reality that these women are not stereotypes or statistics. By installing the dresses in everyday spaces, the artwork breaks the stereotype of Indigenous issues being remote or historical. It insists this is a current Canadian issue, implicating viewers of the current context: here and now.

The public response to the REDress Project has been profound, sparking dialogues at universities, museums, and even Parliament about why Indigenous women have been so vulnerable and why their stories were so long ignored. In artistic terms, it's a masterstroke of simplicity and symbolism: anyone seeing an array of red dresses blowing in the wind, empty, intuitively understands a message of loss and calls to mind the women who should be wearing those dresses. This is art as activism, reshaping perception by moving the heart and conscience. It counters any lingering stereotype of Indigenous women as marginal or disposable. Instead, it frames them as deeply missed members of the community whose unjust absence is impossible to overlook.

Performance and satire against exotification

Indigenous women artists themselves have also tackled stereotypes head-on. Performance artist Lori Blondeau (Cree/Métis/Salteaux) created personas like "Belle Sauvage" (2004-2010) and "Cosmosquaw" (1996) that caricature and thus critique the hypersexualized Indian princess and the stoic Indian woman tropes (Enright, 2021). By exaggerating these images in satirical performances, Blondeau helps audiences recognize the absurdity and harm of such stereotypes. She transforms herself into the very caricature the stereotype imagines and, in doing so, exposes its artificiality.

Public visual art has perhaps the most immediate effect on stereotypes because it reaches people outside the rarified gallery world. Consider the impact of murals and monuments: Edmonton's mural of Alex Janvier (Denesuline) on a municipal building asserts

Indigenous presence and contribution in a city context. Graffiti and street art by young Indigenous creators have used urban walls to portray vibrant Indigenous characters and messages, altering the visual landscape that has historically ignored Indigenous narratives.

Authenticity tokenism and market demand

In our interview, Bordeleau also critiqued how guilt and tokenism can play into the art world's current embrace of Indigenous art. She observed that recently *"White people feel obliged to like Indigenous art now, even if it's not good"*. She noted a certain superficiality in how some institutions or collectors approach Indigenous art out of a sense of guilt or trendiness in the reconciliation era, rather than genuine understanding. Her authenticity highlights a contradiction: while Indigenous art is celebrated, not all engagement with it is sincere or informed. Some artists might even exploit this by producing work that merely caters to what non-Indigenous audiences expect to see, rather than pushing boundaries. This is a nuanced internal critique, essentially, she is warning against turning Indigenous art into a new stereotype of its own, a fashionable commodity labeled "Indigenous" that sells regardless of depth. It's a reminder that thinking about who controls the narrative remains important. Visual art can reshape public perception, but only if it continues to come from authentic voices and not become co-opted or diluted by market forces or outsider expectations.

In the words of Fanon, colonialism's greatest cruelty was perhaps the imprinting of a false self-image onto the colonized and the colonizer. Art allows for a re-imaging; a replacement of those false images with truer reflections. When Canadians see Indigenous art that is fierce, funny, sorrowful, and modern, they encounter Indigenous peoples, through their creative expression, rather than one-dimensional characters. This fosters empathy and a break from the colonial lens. Visual art offers ways to bypass the defensiveness that sometimes arises in political discussions; it can reach people on an emotional level first.

Maybe this art-fueled reevaluation is not only for non-Indigenous consumption. Indigenous audiences, too, find empowerment and healing in seeing themselves represented with dignity, satire or complexity. The stereotype of the vanishing Indian can weigh on Indigenous youth; seeing art by someone like Monkman or Belcourt asserts to them that Indigenous futures exist and are bright with creativity. It can also encourage them to question any internalized stereotypes they may have absorbed about their own culture's value or relevance.

The interviews I had reinforced the idea that Indigenous artists are very much aware of their dual role as creators and educators. Franck Miroux noted the importance of artists using “the tools of the colonizer to decolonize the discourse”. This is evident in how artists consciously present their work. Many incorporate artist statements that frame their intentions, ensuring viewers don’t miss the point. They often engage in public talks or exhibit openings to contextualize their work in historical and cultural terms, effectively acting as educators combating stereotypes. For instance, as Karen Duffek told me, at exhibit openings for contemporary Indigenous art it’s now common to have elders or community representatives perform ceremonies or speak, which immediately sets a different tone, one of respect and living culture, again breaking the stereotype that Indigenous culture is antiquated or solely ceremonial.

Thus, visual art in the hands of Indigenous creators has proven to be a transformative medium for reshaping public perception. Projects like Monkman’s Miss Chief interventions, the REDress installations, and many others operate as forms of visual sovereignty by reclaiming the representation of Indigenous bodies and stories. They tackle stereotypes by compelling imagery and participatory experiences, engaging viewers emotionally and intellectually. In doing so, they pave the way for a broader societal shift: from seeing Indigenous peoples through a colonial caricature to seeing them as contemporaries, neighbors, leaders, and knowledge holders. This not only humanizes and empowers Indigenous communities, but it also challenges non-Indigenous Canadians to question the colonial narratives still present. Art becomes a space of encounter and reflection, which is indispensable for the way to a mutual understanding and respect.

D. Affirmation of cultural identities through Indigenous arts: techniques and mediums. Artists' tools for expressing cultural identity

Indigenous artists in Canada today are blending traditional techniques with contemporary media in innovative ways, creating art that not only challenges colonial narratives but affirms Indigenous cultural identities on their own terms. This synthesis of old and new serves multiple purposes: it honors ancestral practices as a form of cultural continuity and resistance to erasure, it communicates Indigenous values like respect for nature and spirituality, and it exercises what scholars express as epistemological sovereignty: the authority over one's own knowledge systems and modes of expression. Through their choice of materials, techniques, and themes, Indigenous artists assert that their identities are dynamic and self-determined, challenging colonial categories.

Land, spirit and resilience

A recurring series of themes in a great deal of Indigenous art are nature, spirituality, and resilience. These themes are deeply interwoven in Indigenous worldview. The land is imbued with spirit, and survival or resilience, is often achieved through spiritual connection to land and culture. We see these elements prominently in the works of artists like Christi Belcourt and Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau.

Belcourt's paintings are renowned for their depiction of nature with spiritual reverence. In her large canvases such as *Water Song* or *The Wisdom of the Universe*, thousands of tiny dots of paint blend into sophisticated floral patterns and images of birds, insects, and ancestral figures. This technique of dot painting is deliberate: Belcourt dips the end of a paintbrush or even a knitting needle to create dots that emulate the appearance of 19th-century Métis beadwork. In doing so, she bridges a traditional women's craft, beadwork, used to adorn clothing and items with floral designs symbolizing life, with the fine art of painting on canvas. The effect is visible, as an almost textile-like surface, but it is also culturally significant. Belcourt is paying homage to Métis heritage (Berg, 2018) while firmly planting that heritage in contemporary art galleries. This is hybridity in action: a traditional technique or aesthetic is transplanted into a modern medium, creating something new that carries the *spirit* of the old. It exemplifies what Miroux noted about artists *"hybridizing and creolizing"* imported forms. Here, Belcourt takes the imported form of European-style painting and infuses it with Métis visual language, without losing its soul.

Christi Belcourt, *Water Song,* 2010-2011

Christi Belcourt, *The Wisdom of the Universe*, 2014

The content of Belcourt's art then underscores Indigenous spirituality and environmental consciousness. Curator Nadia Kurd observes that Belcourt's work "celebrates the beauty of the natural world and traditional Indigenous views on spirituality and natural medicines, while it explores nature's symbolic properties" (Berg, 2018). Indeed, Belcourt

often includes medicinal plants and water motifs, tying her art to teachings about the interdependence of life. Her paintings are often described as having a healing quality; they are not just depictions of nature, but invocations of the relationships between humans and beyond. For example, her piece *"Offerings to Save the World"* (2017) features human figures in contemplative poses on either side of a swirling celestial tree of life, connected by flowing water and surrounded by flowers and animals. The painting suggests a spiritual dialogue with the Earth, echoing Indigenous teachings that humanity must live in balance with nature. By using her grandmother's beadwork style to convey a contemporary environmental message, Belcourt asserts an Indigenous identity that is both modern and traditionally rooted. It counters the colonial notion that Indigenous culture must remain static to be "authentic." And here, authenticity comes from deep connection and respect, not from stagnation.

Christi Belcourt, *Offerings to Save the World*, 2017

Likewise, Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau's multidisciplinary art blends traditional and modern forms to affirm her Cree identity and comment on contemporary issues. Bordeleau works in painting, sculpture, installation, and writing which reflects the multidimensionality of Indigenous knowledge where art, story, and spirituality are often inseparable. In her paintings, she sometimes uses ancestral symbols and natural materials like mixing pigments with natural substances. In installations, she uses textiles (sewing and embroidery) alongside painted elements. Embroidery and sewing are skills passed through generations and often gendered as women's work and have deep resonance in Indigenous communities. Also, the act of sewing can be interpreted as a metaphor for healing or reweaving the fabric of community. By elevating these techniques to installation art, Bordeleau breaks the Western hierarchy that places "high" art (oil painting, bronze sculpture) above "craft." Instead, she asserts that sewing a quilt or beading a garment can carry as much intellectual and cultural weight as a canvas. It asserts the validity of Indigenous artistic forms. This is a direct claim of epistemological sovereignty: she chooses how to express and which mediums to validate, rather than accepting colonial art standards.

The interplay between traditional techniques and contemporary media is not only aesthetic but political. It speaks to what scholar Gerald Vizenor called survivance, that is to say an active sense of presence and survival through adaptive change. When artists bead digital prints or carve ancient stories into modern materials like plexiglass, they are performing survivance. They refuse to let traditions be consigned to museums; instead, traditions *live* by evolving. This interplay also produces what some theorists label *hybridity* (Bhabha, 1994), which is a creative, in-between space that rejects the purist notions of culture. Indigenous artists are experts in cultural hybridity because they have had to straddle worlds for generations, and now they do so on their own terms, often with a playful or tactical approach. For instance, Kevin McKenzie (Cree/Métis) creates contemporary sculptural works using traditional beadwork motifs but applied to fiberglass sculptures or using synthetic materials. Also, Brian Jungen (Dane-zaa) is famous for making indigenous iconography out of deconstructed Nike Air Jordan sneakers for example, assembling the shoes into a sculpture that resembles a Northwest Coast mask or a whale skeleton. Jungen's work cleverly uses a symbol of modern capitalism and Indigenous stereotypical imagery, like sneakers and sports gear, to craft something deeply rooted in Indigenous form, thus commenting on commodification and identity. This kind of material hybrid animal hide

replaced by sneaker leather in a “mask”, asks: what is traditional and what is contemporary? It blurs that line, implying that Indigenous identity can inhabit both realms.

Beadwork has particularly become a powerful bridge between past and present. Many Indigenous artists, especially women and Two-Spirit artists, incorporate beadwork into fine art pieces, sometimes literally beading onto canvas or photographs as in the work of Sherry Farrell-Racette, or creating portraits made entirely of beads. The National Gallery of Canada even hosted an exhibition called “Beads that Speak: Acts of Visual Sovereignty” (LaVallée, 2024), highlighting how beadwork, once dismissed as mere craft, is being used as a contemporary voice of sovereignty. Each bead can carry story and knowledge. By using this technique in modern art, artists assert continuity with their ancestors and claim space in contemporary discourse simultaneously. Hide painting is another traditional form seeing revitalization. Artists like Jerry Evans (Mi’kmaq) have painted on animal hides using both older designs and new imagery, bridging ceremonial art and gallery art. Similarly, the use of quillwork (porcupine quills) by artists like Nathalie Bertin in modern mixed-media works brings an old technique into today’s art scene. By doing so, they educate audiences about the skill and meaning of these practices and assert that Indigenous culture is alive. Indigenous artists are also embracing digital art, video, and installation in ways that carry tradition forward. For example, the Inuit artist Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory combines video projection with the ancient Greenlandic mask dance of uaajeerneq, creating performance art that is at once millennia-old and cutting edge.

The concept of survivance is embodied in these technique choices. By using what was used to oppress (e.g. English language, oil painting, film) and infusing it with Indigenous spirit, artists enact survivance. They survive and go beyond mere survival by creatively thriving. In Miroux’s words when talking about language strategies, they *“instrumentalize the tool of the colonizer to decolonize the discourse”*. A poignant example is how some Indigenous languages, once forced into writing by missionaries, are now proudly incorporated into visual art. For instance, Cree syllabics appear in the digital art of Joi T. Arcand (Cree), sometimes spelling out messages or place names, as a visual assertion of language survivance.

Another aspect is resisting appropriation and misframing. Indigenous artists are aware of appropriation, both the blatant kind (non-Indigenous artists borrowing designs or styles) and the subtle kind (institutions co-opting Indigenous art for a token diversity appearance). The late Ojibwe artist Carl Beam in the 1980s famously included images of

Picasso alongside Indigenous imagery in his collages, hinting at how modern art itself was built on appropriating Indigenous and African motifs. He was essentially reclaiming those back.

Today, controversies still erupt, such as non-Indigenous artists falsely claiming Indigenous identity to sell work like the case of a so-called "Pretendian" curator in Quebec that Franck Miroux mentioned in our interview, who was asked to stop misrepresenting themselves. These incidents are themselves fodder for Indigenous artists and critics to further assert identity. As Miroux noted, such actions by imposters "parasite" spaces meant for real Indigenous artists, and communities have rightly condemned them. By contrast, when Indigenous artists use non-Indigenous materials or references, it's a different power dynamic, one of subversion rather than theft, because they are reclaiming what was taken or using it to strengthen their own voice.

The affirmation of cultural identities through Indigenous arts is an ongoing, dynamic process. It involves artists mastering a range of techniques from porcupine quill embroidery to digital projection mapping. It involves the conscious blending of methods: what artist and scholar Léuli Eshrāghi calls the "infinite loop" between ancestors and future descendants in Indigenous creativity. By doing so, artists assert sovereignty not just in the political sense but in the *cultural and intellectual* sense. They claim the right to define what their art means, how it's made, how it's shown, and how it evolves. This stands in contrast to the colonial era when Indigenous creative expressions were catalogued by outsiders or confined to static definitions. Today, one can walk into a gallery and see a video installation that incorporates a Cree lullaby and futuristic graphics, or a sculpture made of tree sap, steel and stories. These works embody a decolonial aesthetic that refuses to be categorized.

Indigenous arts, through their techniques and mediums, tell a story of continuity and change, oppression and resistance, loss and healing. They demonstrate that reconciliation, if it is to mean anything, must include giving space for Indigenous people to express the full spectrum of their identities in the past, in the present, in the future, and in their own creative ways. Canada's institutions are slowly adapting with more Indigenous curators, community-led exhibits for instance, but Indigenous artists have been leading the way, often pulling those institutions along with their bold visions. As this first section of this *mémoire* has explored, the journey from colonial narratives to Indigenous self-representation in art is both historical and contemporary, fraught with challenges but rich with transformative potential. The postcolonial and decolonial critiques woven throughout show that art is never just art

but it is tied to power. And by reclaiming power in the artistic realm, Indigenous people are also chipping away at colonial power in the social and political realms. Art becomes a form of “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo) and “resurgence” (Simpson), asserting the right to know, to remember, to create, and to be heard on their own terms.

II. The artists: identities, myths and social roles

This section examines how Indigenous artists in Canada negotiate identity and agency under settler colonialism, drawing on postcolonial and resurgence theories. Postcolonial studies shows that colonial institutions impose their own mythologies on Indigenous subjects, often fetishizing or silencing their voices. Indigenous cultural resurgence, by contrast, emphasizes community-driven renewal of knowledge and governance (Coulthard, 2014). Artists seek visibility within mainstream art worlds but risk reinforcing colonial stereotypes. For example, press coverage of Norval Morrisseau often cast him into the "Noble Savage" trope (Robertson, 2016). Such tension, the need to be seen, yet not simply as exotic "Others", lies at the heart of this second section. While settler audiences may expect mystical or essentialized artist-shamans, many Indigenous creators actively deconstruct those myths. Instead, they assert cultural authority by grounding art in lived experience, community values, and political struggle. As *The Art Story* notes, contemporary Indigenous artists in Canada "seek to celebrate their traditions and cultures, as well as to call out the injustices their ancestors have suffered at the hands of European colonialist forces" (The Art Story Foundation, n.d) This dual focus on tradition and critique illustrates how artistic practice can be a form of resistance and renewal.

Moreover, Indigenous theorists like Coulthard remind us that decolonization requires moving beyond recognition by colonial powers. Coulthard argues that true resurgence involves "revalu[ing], reconstruct[ing], and redeploy[ing] Indigenous cultural practices based on self-recognition rather than on seeking appreciation from the very agents of colonialism" (Coulthard, 2014). In other words, Indigenous creative agency is most potent when driven by community standards and purposes, not simply to win mainstream applause. Smith similarly describes Western "regimes of truth" in museums and calls for reclaiming control over Indigenous ways of knowing (Smith, 2021). By these lights, an artist's social role is inherently political: art becomes a site for teaching, healing, and sovereignty. This following section will thus explore myth deconstruction and cultural agency in artists' work as well as the ways artists serve as curators and strategists in reshaping institutions.

A. Contesting colonial myths and reclaiming identity

Norval Morrisseau, *Artist and Shaman Between Two Worlds,* 1980.

Morrisseau is often called the "grandfather" of contemporary Indigenous art in Canada. He embodied the complex artist-shaman trope. His own work *Artist and Shaman Between Two Worlds* (1980) blends bright, symbolic forms with spiritual and political themes. But he was also subject to colonial framing. Critics routinely labeled him a "shaman" and exploited Indigenous caricatures to sell his art (Robertson, 2016). Morrisseau himself at times played into these expectations for example by staging a pseudo-ceremony for the media to gain visibility[5]. Yet he also used this platform to reclaim narrative: his paintings force viewers to confront First Nations stories on their own terms. This ambivalence of the artist as both shamanic guardian and savvy storyteller characterizes the broader struggle. Other artists challenge the shaman myth more directly by refusing its exotic trappings. For instance, painter Christi Belcourt instead foregrounds everyday sovereignty and environment. She uses Métis floral beadwork imagery to demand Indigenous rights and ecological protection. In interviews she emphasizes that her art comes with a duty: "I have a responsibility to my community with my art because I'm borrowing off of the patterns the

[5] "At times, Morrisseau capitalized on this reality, exploiting the clichés to his own ends. His famous 1978 tea party in which Morrisseau played the role of shaman for a group of assembled guests." (Robertson, 2016)

artistic legacy that's been handed down to me and others from our ancestors. I have a responsibility to my community to always be giving back"[6] (Bateman, 2024). Some Belcourt's canvases are portraits of plants and animals, yet they contain urgent political messages understood as a "revolution" to save the land and reclaim stolen territory. By basing innovation in tradition and activism, Belcourt reclaims agency and defines authenticity not as mystical otherness but as reciprocity and survival.

Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau likewise rejects simplistic tropes by foregrounding hybridity and honest narrative. A Cree-Métis writer and painter, she addresses complex identity without romanticizing. Her work exemplifes Bourdieu's insight that "cultural production" is a field of struggle. By producing a novel like *The Lover, the Lake* (2013), described as the first Indigenous woman's erotic novel in French[7], she challenged both literary and cultural expectations. In her visual art, Virginia often blurs autobiography and legend. For example, one of her portraits might mix mainstream pop imagery with animal iconography, signaling the blend of worlds she inhabits. She refuses the idea that authentic Indigenous art must appear "traditional"; instead, she honors that identities are "always unfinished, always being remade", a point echoed in postcolonial literature. As Spivak and postcolonial feminist critics note, the subaltern Indigenous woman must fight stereotypes of sexual and social roles when speaking - or here, creating. Virginia's multidisciplinary practice embodies this fight as she uses narrative authority to speak as herself.

In this way her practice asserts the subaltern's right to self-representation. These artists construct socio-political identities that negotiate settler expectations. Morrisseau repurposed the shaman-hero myth while Belcourt and Bordeleau foreground community and personal experience. All engage Coulthard's idea of resurgence by honoring Indigenous knowledge internally, not just by seeking white recognition (Coulthard, 2014). And from a Bourdieusian perspective, their success in galleries shows how Indigenous cultural capital can be won in the dominant art field even as they confront its hierarchy. In short, these artists reclaim what it means to be an "authentic" Indigenous artist: one who carries ancestral memory while actively transforming it.

[6] In a podcast hosted by NetVUE, Christi Belcourt (2024) gives a reflection on her vocation and how she is dedicated to her community and to the natural world.
https://netvue.buzzsprout.com/1282658/episodes/15392188-art-saved-the-mountain-christi-belcourt

[7] In Bruxelles during a conference I attended, Virginia admitted she didn't totally agree with the category "erotic" labeled on her novel especially by Western critiques.

B. Curating resistance: the artist as curator and cultural strategist

Beyond making art, many Indigenous practitioners now act as curators and strategists, reshaping how art is exhibited and who decides the narrative. As Smith insists, decolonizing research, and by extension curation, means foregrounding Indigenous methods and stories that have long been "regimes of truth" (Smith, 2021). In museum terms, this calls for practices like co-curation through partnerships where Indigenous people share authority and protocol-based displays that respect community customs. Witcomb's notion of a dialogical museum likewise argues that exhibitions should be conversations between curators and communities, not one-way authority (Witcomb, 2002). Indigenous artist-curators have put these ideas into practice. For example, Tania Willard (Secwépemc) co-curated *Beat Nation: Art, Hip Hop and Aboriginal Culture* (2010-2012), an influential show linking Indigenous identity to urban music, graffiti and youth culture. In an interview in *Canadian Art* Willard has described *Beat Nation* as starting "with a very artist-run-centre approach" with a flexible grassroots model and never intending to become the touring blockbuster it did (Sandals, 2013). The exhibition's success, as it toured nationally and internationally, demonstrated how Indigenous artists could seed institutional change from the ground up, taking their own culture into major galleries on their own terms.

Beat Nation itself illustrates how Indigenous curators expand art's scope. By juxtaposing hip hop and graffiti with Northwest Coast form-line imagery, the show revealed how urban Aboriginal youth create new forms of storytelling and political expression (Kamloop Art Gallery, 2013). As the Kamloops Art Gallery explains on their website, *Beat Nation* artists "juxtapose urban youth culture with Aboriginal identity to reflect the current realities of Aboriginal peoples today". The curators collected works ranging from video mashups to live rap in Indigenous languages, demonstrating that political critique and tradition can merge in contemporary hybrid forms. In interviews, Willard emphasized that this dynamic process went beyond the conventional white-cube show[8] as it "branched out" into street aesthetics and community participation.

[8] White-cube show: art-world shorthand for an exhibition installed in a deliberately "neutral" modernist gallery: white walls, even lighting, no visible architectural or historical context. The design, theorized by Brian O'Doherty in *Inside the White Cube* (1986), aims to isolate artworks from everyday life so that meaning appears to arise purely from aesthetic form; critics argue that this supposed neutrality actually masks Euro-centric, market-driven values.

Other artist-curators have similarly challenged museum structures. Kent Monkman once again subverts their norms. In the context of his exhibition in the great hall in 2019 of the two artworks seen above, *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)*, The Met's curators note, these "radical paintings act as a different kind of portal, welcoming and signaling new interpretations of the Museum's encyclopedic collections" (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019). By occupying such a symbolic space, Monkman forced the institution to display Indigenous history at its core. He has explicitly said his goal was to "insert First Peoples' histories and experiences into the predominant narratives of Western culture" (Griffey, 2019). This kind of creative curation, using the museum's language (history painting) against itself exemplifies Witcomb's dialogical ideal. It shows how an artist-as-curator can subvert colonial frameworks from within and demand institutional accountability to Indigenous perspectives. In fact, Monkman's approach echoes Hopkins's principle that Indigenous self-determination must guide decolonial projects: as Hopkins observes, "Self-determination is the basis for any decolonial movement" (Ketchum-Heap of Bird, 2023). When artists like Monkman or Hopkins curate, they demand that museums share authority rather than impose it.

Case studies of Indigenous-led exhibitions further illustrate these shifts. *Yes, Yes, Yes* (2018), a video survey curated by Hopkins (Tlingit/Tahltan) in Berlin, collected works by First Nations artists on themes of belonging and displacement, bringing Indigenous-curated content into a European context. Hopkins has said such shows allow Indigenous people to "catch up" audience understanding by putting onus on institutions to do the work of decolonizing (rather than educating only Indigenous viewers). Similarly, *BEAT NATION* and *Soundings: An Exhibition in Five Parts* (curated by Hopkins and Dylan Robinson, 2013) programmed Indigenous music, film and workshops into museum spaces, creating living dialogues. These projects follow Smith's call to "reclaim control over Indigenous ways of knowing" (Smith, 2021). They often involve community input at every stage, from selecting works to writing wall texts, to ensure protocols are observed (for instance, elders' guidance on sacred imagery or repatriation issues). Interviews with Indigenous curators note that co-curation brings new narrative authority: Indigenous collaborators demand that labels and storylines reflect their worldviews, not colonial assumptions. Nevertheless, curators like Karen Duffek and Jordan Wilson point out that institutional constraints remain language barriers, rigid museum schedules, funding rules and colonial acquisition policies can all limit how fully Indigenous perspectives appear (Figure 1, 2021).

Despite these challenges, the trend is clear: more Indigenous artists are asserting the curator's role to resist colonial legacies. By moving into exhibition-making and leadership, they redefine the artist's social role as cultural strategist. Their work aligns with theory: Smith's "decolonizing methodologies" are enacted in practice, and Witcomb's dialogical museum becomes tangible. As Monkman's Met curators note, placing Indigenous art in major museums is not mere tokenism but can inspire "a painterly reevaluation of history" (Griffey, 2019). Ultimately, these artist-curators show that art is inseparable from politics. By rewriting displays and programming dialogues, they open institutional spaces to Indigenous resurgence, ensuring that the stories told are no longer solely those of the colonizers.

B. Economic and social ecologies of Indigenous art

Political economy of Indigenous Art

Indigenous art in Canada today operates within a complex political economy shaped by both market forces and institutional support. In recent decades, Indigenous artists have gained visibility in major art biennales and international exhibitions, signaling a shift in the "field" of cultural production (Bailey, 2024). A wave of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artists now exhibit on global stages that once excluded them. For example, the Inuit film collective *Isuma* became the first-ever Inuit artists to represent Canada at the prestigious Venice Biennale in 2019. Their installation not only centered Inuit narratives of colonial displacement, but literally inscribed an Indigenous presence into the Canada Pavilion's architecture where a prominent *Isuma* plaque was installed (Arluk, 2019). Such breakthroughs, alongside events like the Sydney Biennale led by an Aboriginal artistic director in 2020, demonstrate the growing cultural capital of Indigenous art on the world stage. In Bourdieu's sense, Indigenous artists are claiming new positions in the artistic "field," converting years of marginalization into recognition and prestige, a form of symbolic power.

Parallel to these global market trajectories, there has been a concerted rise in domestic support through grants and institutions. The Canada Council for the Arts' *Creating, Knowing and Sharing* program, launched in 2017, explicitly funds First Nations, Inuit, and Métis arts. This initiative represented a paradigm shift in funding, more than tripling the Council's annual support for Indigenous arts and cultures within a few years (Brault &

Joliette, 2023). By 2023, Council leadership noted that this Indigenous-led program had transformed their practices, helping to "honour Indigenous ways of knowing" and address biases in mainstream arts funding. Substantial public funding, through project grants, travel support, and strategic initiatives, has thus bolstered Indigenous artists' production and mobility. These institutional investments reflect a broader politics of recognition, as public agencies seek to reconcile with Indigenous communities by amplifying their cultural expressions. At the same time, they illustrate Arjun Appadurai's idea of cultural "circulation" (Coulthard, 2014): artworks move from community contexts into national collections, biennales, and markets, accruing new value as they travel. An oil painting or carving might begin as a deeply situated cultural item and later become a high-priced commodity in a southern auction, or a celebrated artwork in a museum, depending on its social trajectory. Indigenous art thus inhabits a dual economy: one of communal value and story, and one of exchange value in the art market. Artists must continuously negotiate this duality. Many consciously manage how their work enters the market, mindful of both opportunity and risk. For instance, some artists produce highly limited editions or work with Indigenous-owned galleries to maintain control over pricing and context, converting cultural capital into economic capital on their own terms. In this way, Indigenous creators exercise agency within what Bourdieu calls the "economic world reversed," where cultural value can ultimately translate into economic gain. Yet unlike the pure market logic, their decisions often balance profit with cultural responsibility.

In fact, the sales dynamics of Indigenous art are distinct. Demand for authentic works has surged as public appreciation grows, but this can pressure artists to produce what sells (often imagery that caters to non-Indigenous expectations) versus what challenges audiences. Some artists tactically deploy dual markets: offering more affordable pieces or community-focused projects at home, while placing large works in international fairs or commercial galleries. Others leverage institutions like the Art Gallery of Ontario or the Winnipeg Art Gallery's Inuit Art Centre to ensure their work circulates in educational, not just commercial, venues. This interplay of markets and institutions suggests that Indigenous art's political economy cannot be reduced to simple supply and demand. Rather, it is shaped by what Bourdieu would call the *field's* specific logic, a push and pull between cultural authenticity, communal obligations, and the imperatives of the art market. As we will see, this entanglement brings not only opportunities but also structural challenges that demand nuanced navigation by Indigenous artists.

Risks and structural challenges

While opportunities have grown, Indigenous artists continue to face serious risks and structural challenges within this ecology. One prominent issue is the persistence of fraud, appropriation, and cultural gatekeeping that undermines Indigenous agency. A striking example is the Norval Morrisseau forgery scandal, which exposed vulnerabilities in the art market's treatment of Indigenous work. Morrisseau (Anishinaabe), often called the "Picasso of the North," had dozens of imitators producing fake paintings for profit (Ditman, 2024). In 2023, an Ontario police investigation revealed "the biggest art fraud in world history", a forgery ring that peddled *thousands* of fake Morrisseau works over decades. Eight people were charged, including a member of Morrisseau's own family, and over 1,000 fakes were seized.The scheme even involved "paint-by-number" sweatshops where young Indigenous artists were allegedly exploited to manufacture knock-offs. The damage, as the trial judge noted, was profound: Morrisseau's legacy was "irrevocably damaged" and his spiritual artistic vision "undermined" by this fraud. This case highlights systemic weaknesses, a lack of robust authentication infrastructure and, arguably, a strain of racism in the market that long devalued Indigenous works, making it easier for fakes to circulate without scrutiny. It was only after a high-profile documentary (*There Are No Fakes*, 2019) and legal action that institutions took the problem seriously. The Morrisseau scandal has since prompted calls for better certification systems and resourced provenance research for Indigenous art, to prevent such exploitation in the future.

Another challenge is the infringement of Indigenous intellectual property (IP) rights through cultural appropriation. Métis visual artist Christi Belcourt's experience with the fashion industry is a cautionary tale. In 2015, Belcourt collaborated with luxury brand Valentino, lending her floral beadwork designs to a high-profile collection, a partnership she entered after careful research to ensure the brand had no record of misusing Indigenous imagery. However, Belcourt soon discovered that alongside the official collaboration, Valentino had produced accessories (like a $1,500 backpack) emblazoned with beadwork designs copied directly from Indigenous artifacts without permission. Worse, after her collection launched, a flood of overseas knock-off companies began pirating her patterns and selling cheap imitations (Metcalfe, 2017). Belcourt describes "playing whack-a-mole", filing takedown requests against websites that would vanish only to pop up elsewhere. Eventually she had to concede that "there's nothing you can do" to fully stop these knockoffs. The experience left her disappointed and disillusioned: it showed that even a seemingly respectful collaboration could inadvertently legitimize appropriation, giving

cover for others to "bastardize the designs and steal the artwork" with impunity. Belcourt's case exemplifies how global capitalism often fails Indigenous artist, international IP law offers scant protection for communal designs or knowledge, and enforcement across jurisdictions is virtually impossible. As Belcourt notes, the underlying problem is that companies operating under Eurocentric norms have "no real understanding" of Indigenous peoples and thus easily disrespect their work. This asymmetry forces Indigenous artists to remain vigilant and, in some cases, to retreat from collaborations with outsiders. It also underscores the need for stronger legal frameworks (or alternative licensing models) to protect Indigenous cultural expressions from misappropriation.

Structural racism and gatekeeping further complicate the landscape. Glen Coulthard's critique of the colonial "politics of recognition" is relevant here: he argues that state and institutional recognition of Indigenous culture, when granted on the colonizer's terms, can end up reproducing colonial power dynamics (Coulthard, 2014). We see echoes of this in how Indigenous artists are sometimes authenticated or included. For instance, government programs historically imposed their own criteria (e.g. the "Eskimo Identification Tag" system for Inuit art in the 20th century) which, while intended to assure authenticity, also wrested control from Indigenous hands. Encouragingly, the *Igloo Tag* trademark for Inuit art was transferred in 2017 from federal control to the Inuit Art Foundation, ending the era of government as the arbiter of authenticity (Ducharme, 2017). The notion that "the government authenticating Inuit art has come and gone" was hailed as a positive step. Still, new forms of gatekeeping have emerged. The art world has grappled with the rise of **"**Pretendians**"**, non-Indigenous individuals falsely claiming Indigenous identity to access opportunities and grants meant for Indigenous peoples. Controversies, such as writer Joseph Boyden's and artist Gina Adams's contested claims of Indigeneity, reveal how such frauds can "parasitize structures for Indigenous people" (as Franck Miroux puts it). In Gina Adams's case, an Ojibwe community affiliation was fabricated, allowing her to build an art career (and secure a university post) under false pretenses. When exposed in 2022, Adams resigned in disgrace (Liu, 2022). These incidents betray the trust of communities and create backlash that often harms legitimate Indigenous artists most. They also force institutions to ask uncomfortable questions about how they certify indigeneity, a process that can slide into policing Indigenous identity in problematic ways.

Thus, Indigenous artists encounter structural issues: forgeries that undermine market trust, appropriations that steal economic and cultural value, and gatekeeping that can lead to either exclusion or tokenism. Coulthard's warning resonates, pursuing visibility and

recognition within settler-dominated frameworks can be double-edged. It may secure resources and applause, yet "promise to reproduce the very configurations of colonialist, racist power that Indigenous peoples" demands for recognition have sought to transcend" (Coulthard, 2014). A clear-eyed analysis of these challenges has led many Indigenous artists to develop community-grounded strategies of resilience and refusal, as we examine next.

Community and collective responses

In response to those challenges, Indigenous artists and communities are forging collective strategies to reclaim control over their art's production, distribution, and value. A key approach has been the formation of cooperatives and artist collectives that operate on principles of solidarity rather than pure profit. This is not new, notably, since 1959 the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative in Kinngait (Cape Dorset) has enabled Inuit printmakers to market their art collectively, ensuring fair prices and returns to the artists and community. That cooperative model, community-run print shops selling limited-edition prints globally, proved highly successful and became a template for economic self-determination in the arts. Today, similar models are emerging across mediums. Beadwork cooperatives, often led by Indigenous women, have sprung up to support artisans who make traditional jewelry and regalia. By pooling resources, sharing marketing platforms, and collectively setting prices, these co-ops protect members from exploitation by middlemen and prevent undercutting each other. An example is the Indigenous Arts Collective of Canada, which runs the online marketplace *IndigenARTSY*. It supports hundreds of artisans by providing an e-commerce platform "powered and empowered by Indigenous artists," effectively bypassing conventional galleries. Through such cooperatives, artists enforce their own standards of authenticity and quality, and profits circulate back into communities, strengthening cultural practices.

Innovative use of open licensing and legal tools is another avenue. Recognizing that Western intellectual property law inadequately protects traditional knowledge, some Indigenous groups and advocates are adapting frameworks like Creative Commons to better suit Indigenous needs. In New Zealand, for instance, Māori scholars have discussed creating an *Indigenous Creative Commons license* that would allow sharing knowledge with conditions respecting tribal ownership. The idea is to embed Indigenous cultural protocols into how creative works are circulated. For example, a license might permit educational use of an image but prohibit any commercial use or distortion contrary to the source community's values. While such a tailored CC license remains largely conceptual, it reflects

a priority on exploring mechanisms for Indigenous peoples to be attributed owners and decision-makers over their cultural materials. In parallel, digital tagging initiatives like Traditional Knowledge (TK) Labels (developed by the Local Contexts project) have been used by some communities to mark digital media with notices that certain songs, designs, or stories are culturally sensitive and require permission to reuse. Canadian Indigenous publishing expert Gregory Younging strongly advocated for sui generis protections of traditional knowledge. He pointed out that the very "precept that all intellectual property… eventually enter the public domain" clashes with Indigenous laws, since *some knowledge is never meant for public access* (Shida, 2021). Under Indigenous customary law, sacred stories or designs might be collectively owned in perpetuity by a nation or family, with strict limits on sharing. Younging noted that current copyright terms force communities to eventually relinquish control, enabling misappropriation once material is "free for anyone to use". To counter this, Indigenous artists and lawyers have pushed for reforms (for example, integrating Article 31 of UNDRIP into Canadian law) and, in the meantime, have employed work-arounds: keeping certain knowledge off public forums, using contracts to assert communal ownership, or applying customized licenses that assert Indigenous copyright beyond Western limits. These efforts, though still developing, represent Indigenous-driven legal innovation to safeguard cultural heritage.

Emerging technologies are also being harnessed in line with Indigenous values for instance through solidarity-based NFTs and blockchain projects. While the mainstream NFT market has been fraught with speculation, Indigenous artists are repurposing these tools to support community aims. Some Indigenous-led NFT initiatives have explicitly foregrounded cultural preservation and fair distribution. For example, Canada's *400 Drums* project uses NFT sales to fund Indigenous language revitalization and elder knowledge workshops. What unites these experiments is an ethic of collective benefit: they aim to bypass gallery gatekeepers and create direct relationships between artists and supporters, with contracts that send royalties back to creators or community funds. Advocates note that NFTs, in an ideal form, allow artists to "share their stories, elevate their causes, and take true ownership over their work, without the need for intermediaries". In other words, blockchain can secure provenance and perpetual resale royalties, addressing issues that have long plagued Indigenous art markets (such as artists not benefiting from soaring resale values of their work). While still nascent, these "crypto Indigenous" initiatives represent a marriage of ancestral knowledge with cutting-edge tech, guided by principles of self-determination and solidarity rather than pure profit.

Furthermore, Indigenous artists are developing their own channels of distribution and pricing that reflect community values. Some have established Indigenous-run galleries, art fairs, and online shops where they set pricing structures that consider community access. For instance, an artist may price works affordably for local Indigenous buyers (or accept barter/trade in traditional forms), yet set higher prices for museums or international collectors, effectively using differential pricing to maintain community ownership of important pieces. Others practice "sliding scale" or honor-based pricing for community members, to ensure that financial barriers do not lock their own people out of enjoying or ceremonially using their art. These practices invert the typical market logic and echo Indigenous economic principles of reciprocity and redistribution. In setting such terms, artists assert sovereignty over the commercial life of their work: a form of what Leanne Betasamosake Simpson might call "resurgent" economics, where Indigenous norms drive the exchange. We also see collective bargaining emerging: groups of artists band together to refuse underpayment, exposing galleries that take excessive commissions or urging institutions to adopt royalty policies. The momentum behind an Artists Resale Right in Canada (a law to give artists a percentage on secondary sales) has been significantly bolstered by Indigenous voices, who draw attention to how, for example, an Inuit carver might sell a sculpture for $500 that later resells for $50,000 with no benefit to the maker or community. Solidarity among Indigenous artists, supported by organizations like CARFAC (Canadian Artists' Representation), is pushing these structural changes.

These community-driven responses of cooperatives, custom licenses, NFTs for good, or self-determined pricing, are grounded in what Coulthard would term a *resurgence* rather than mere *recognition*. They strive not just for inclusion in existing frameworks but for alternative models created *by* and *for* Indigenous people. By privileging collective well-being and cultural continuity, these strategies form an emergent "economic ecology" around Indigenous art that resists the extractive tendencies of the mainstream art market. In doing so, they lay the groundwork for reimagining the social role of the Indigenous artist, to which we now turn.

Social role of the artist

Alongside economic and legal shifts, the social role of Indigenous artists has been evolving, reflecting new understandings of insider/outsider dynamics, generational change, and ethical responsibilities. Historically, Indigenous creators were often positioned as cultural emissaries to the settler public as they can be expected to educate outsiders about

their heritage, or conversely, they were treated as outsiders in the Eurocentric art world, their work relegated to ethnographic contexts. Today, those binaries are breaking down. Indigenous artists increasingly inhabit a dual position as both insiders within their communities and outsiders challenging the settler-colonial art establishment. This can be seen in how they negotiate representation: many feel accountable to their home communities (to represent them authentically and respectfully) while also engaging global audiences with difficult truths. The late Mi'kmaq artist Mike MacDonald, for example, described himself as a "guest" when working with other First Nations, highlighting an ethic of respect on Indigenous terms, even as he was an acclaimed artist at national exhibitions. Likewise, contemporary artists routinely consult elders or knowledge-keepers about proper protocol (e.g. whether a certain story can be depicted in art), an insider ethic, at the same time as they use their art to speak truth to power in predominantly non-Indigenous forums, an outsider activist stance.

A notable generational shift underlies these dynamics. The current generation of Indigenous artists builds upon the activism of their predecessors but often with new mediums and public engagement strategies. Whereas an earlier generation (the "Indian Group of Seven" in the 1970s, or trailblazers like Daphne Odjig and Norval Morrisseau) fought for basic visibility and inclusion in galleries, younger artists assume that visibility and push it further, using art explicitly as a tool for social change and community connection. Digital media and futurism distinguish many younger artists' work. Kanien'kehá:ka (Mohawk) new-media artist *Skawennati*, for instance, exemplifies how public engagement has expanded beyond traditional forms. Skawennati is a visionary pioneer of cyberpunk and virtual art; her online machinima (animated films made in virtual environments) explore contemporary Indigenous realities while also imagining Indigenous futures (Aware Women Artist, 2023). In works like *TimeTraveller*™ (2008-2013), she created an Indigenous avatar who travels through time, educating viewers (especially Indigenous youth) about history and envisioning indigenized tomorrows. Skawennati co-founded Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) and its *Skins* workshops to teach Indigenous youth to be "producers of digital media" and to see themselves as futurists shaping technology (Walker-Kuhne, 2021). This reflects a shift from older paradigms: rather than solely preserving tradition or critiquing the past, young Indigenous artists engage the public in interactive, forward-looking experiences. They often harness social media to reach wide audiences consider how Cree visual artist Kent Monkman's alter-ego *Miss Chief* goes viral to spark debate on colonization and 2SLGBTQI+ issues, or how Métis artist Jaime Black's *REDress Project* galvanized

public consciousness across cities. These artists blur art and activism, engaging the public directly and galvanizing discourse in ways earlier generations could not be due to limited platforms.

The insider/outsider dynamic also plays out in debates over who gets to represent Indigenous stories. Indigenous artists are claiming agency in telling their own stories (insider perspective), which sometimes means rejecting outside curation or resisting pressures to conform to non-Indigenous expectations. At the same time, many work in collaboration with non-Indigenous allies or in multicultural contexts, navigating how to maintain authenticity without isolating themselves. This balance often requires what scholar Smith calls *relational ethics*: recognizing the network of relationships involved in any representation. Many emerging Indigenous artists adhere to frameworks of relational ethics and accountability that guide their practice. In concrete terms, this might mean prioritizing their community's well-being and values over individual fame or market success. It means asking: How does my work serve my people? Am I uplifting others or just myself? Such questions are increasingly foregrounded. The words of Odile Joannette (director of the Canada Council's Indigenous program) echo this ethos: recent research highlights "what art means to Indigenous Peoples, and how that expression links to their culture, ancestors, communities, and the artists' responsibility to future generations" (Bault & Joliette, 2023). This sense of responsibility that is to honor ancestors and to benefit future generations, is a guiding principle for many Indigenous creators. It manifests as mentorship through established artists like Rebecca Belmore who actively mentor youth for instance[9], as community-engaged projects like the public art and collaboration by Métis artist Jaime Black with Indigenous women's organizations[10], and as careful stewardship of cultural knowledge in art. It also means artists hold themselves accountable: if their community critiques their portrayal of a sacred symbol or a political stance, they listen and adjust, embodying a relational accountability that contrasts with Western art's typical valorization of total artistic freedom.

The politics of recognition versus resurgence also influence the artist's role. Coulthard's critique suggests that simply being recognized (e.g. by winning awards, being collected by national galleries) is not the end goal, the deeper goal is transforming the power relationship. We see artists embodying this by using their recognized status as a platform to

[9] She served as faculty in the Indigenous Arts residency at the Banff Centre (2014) and co-led the "Wood Land School" sessions at Plug In ICA in Winnipeg (2017), where emerging Indigenous artists developed performance pieces under her guidance.
[10] Like recently the one at the University of Ottowa, Faculty of medicine, on May 5th, 2025.

advocate for change. For example, when the Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore became the first Indigenous woman to represent Canada at Venice (in 2005), she used that spotlight to confront colonial violence in her piece *Fountain*. Similarly, contemporary Inuk performance artist Laakkuluk Williamson Bathory often addresses her audiences (mixed Indigenous and non-Indigenous) with the understanding that art is a venue for truth-telling and relationship-building, not just aesthetics. This marks an evolution from earlier eras when Indigenous artists were pressured to be cultural diplomats or to "prove" Indigenous art's worth in Western terms. Now, many refuse that burden and instead center their own communities' validation. The social role of the artist is thus more *complex*: they are community historians, knowledge carriers, healers, and educators internally, and simultaneously interlocutors, provocateurs, and bridge-builders externally. Importantly, these roles are not mutually exclusive but interdependent. An artist like the late Mi'kmaq painter Alan Syliboy, for instance, gains strength in the mainstream art world precisely by staying rooted in his community's stories and by returning benefits to Mi'kmaq youth through art workshops. This reciprocity bolsters his credibility both at home and abroad.

Finally, new frameworks of relational ethics have begun to be articulated in arts discourse. Indigenous scholars such as Gregory Younging and elders like Eldon Yellowhorn talk about cultural protocols as living ethical systems. Concepts like the Cree law of *wâhkôhtowin* (kinship, or the interconnectedness of all relations) are informing how artists approach collaborations and representations. Anishinaabe scholar Leanne Simpson advocates for a "grounded normativity", living Indigenous values on the ground, which for artists means their practice is not separate from their community obligations. We see this when artists return to their reserve or Métis settlement to share skills they learned in academia, or when they insist on including community members in the creation process (as Joi T. Arcand did by involving Cree speakers in her neon text art installations). It's also evident in the growing trend of community-curated exhibitions (shows where artists and community representatives co-curate), ensuring the presentation aligns with community perspectives. Such practices embed accountability structurally into the art world.

Indigenous artists today occupy an empowered but demanding social position. They are expected to be cultural mediators, activists, and entrepreneurs all at once, yet they increasingly define success on their own terms, through community impact and adherence to Indigenous ethics. This multi-faceted role is a response to Canada's settler-colonial context: where art becomes a arena for asserting sovereignty, rewriting historical narratives, and fostering healing. The artist's role is continually being re-negotiated in relation to their

communities. The best analogy might be that of a "two-eyed seer", a concept in Mi'kmaq knowledge (Etuaptmumk) meaning one who can see with both eyes: one grounded in Indigenous worldview and one engaging the Western world. Indigenous artists strive to see and create with both eyes open, remaining accountable to their kin while influencing broader society. This evolution of the artist's role sets the stage for examining how institutions and the public are receiving and interacting with Indigenous art, as we will explore in Part III.

Over the course of this second part, we have traced how Indigenous artists in Canada are navigating and reshaping their political and social roles amid ongoing colonial structures. From the market to the community, Indigenous art is not only about aesthetic expression but is deeply entangled with questions of power, economics, and responsibility. We saw that artists have leveraged cultural capital to gain visibility in elite art circles (biennales, major galleries) even as they work to indigenize those spaces with their own voices (Bailey, 2024). They have benefited from new funding streams and recognition, yet remain vigilant about the risks of co-optation, mindful, as Coulthard argues, that mere inclusion can mask persisting inequities (Coulthard, 2014). The forgeries, appropriations, and identity frauds discussed illustrate that settler-colonial challenges are far from resolved; in response, Indigenous artists are increasingly asserting sovereignty in how their art is produced and circulated. Through cooperatives, legal innovation, and digital strategies, they are building parallel systems that reflect Indigenous values of reciprocity and collective stewardship (Shida, 2021). These efforts speak to a broader shift from a politics of recognition to a politics of resurgence: a reclamation of agency in every facet of cultural life.

The social role of the Indigenous artist has expanded into that of a cultural ambassador, advocate, and caretaker. No longer content to be on the margins, Indigenous artists are reimagining what it means to be an "artist" in a settler-colonial context. They balance being insiders (responsible to their communities and ancestors), and outsiders change-agents challenging the status quo (Brault & Joliette, 2023). This dual accountability requires a fine-tuned ethical stance, one grounded in relationality and accountability rather than the individualism that often characterizes Western art practice. As a result, the very definition of artistic success and integrity is being rewritten. It is measured not just by critical acclaim or sales, but by contributions to cultural revitalization, education, and empowerment of others. In this way, the work of artists like Skawennati, Belcourt, or Isuma is as much about nation-building and healing as it is about making art. Their success challenges colonial narratives and offers new models of what art can do in society.

By synthesizing these developments, we see an overarching trajectory: Indigenous artists are emerging as key protagonists in Canada's journey toward decolonization. They operate in the interstices of economics and culture, leveraging art markets and state funding when useful but also constructing alternatives when necessary. Their evolving roles underscore the fact that art and politics are inextricable in a settler society. Every painting, performance, or digital piece carries the potential to contest or reinforce relationships of power. Part II has thus highlighted the agency of artists themselves in transforming those relationships.

As we transition to Part III, our focus will shift to the institutional frameworks and public reception that surround Indigenous art. If Part II centered on artists' strategies and challenges, Part III will examine how museums, galleries, educational institutions, and the Canadian public have been responding. How are institutions reforming their practices to accommodate Indigenous worldviews? In what ways is the public engaging with Indigenous art? Through enthusiasm, misunderstanding, or even resistance? And how do policy frameworks (such as heritage legislation or curricular changes) support or hinder the decolonial momentum generated by artists? By exploring these questions, Part III will build on the understanding that the artist does not stand alone, but within a broader societal context. The insights gained about artists' political and social roles will thus inform our analysis of the systemic changes underway, as Canada's art institutions and audiences reckon with the imperative of reconciliation and Indigenous resurgence. Ultimately, the transition from Part II to Part III marks a shift from the micro (the artist and community) to the macro (the public and institutional domain), completing our examination of the diverse ecologies, (economic, social, and institutional) that shape Indigenous art today.

III. Indigenous art and its reception: institutional frameworks, public perception, and decolonial strategies.

After tracing the historical emergence of Indigenous art in Canada (I) and examining the strategies of artists (II), the final section shifts the lens from production to reception. The meanings and political force of Indigenous artworks are not fixed at the moment they are created: they are continually negotiated in the galleries, museums, public spaces, and media where those works circulate. As Hall (1973) reminds us, cultural texts are "encoded" by producers but "decoded" by audiences within existing power relations. In settler-colonial contexts, that negotiation is conditioned by institutional structures like museums that have long privileged Eurocentric aesthetics and narratives. Indigenous artists, curators, and communities must therefore contend with what Bourdieu (1984) calls the *field* of cultural production: an arena in which symbolic capital is unevenly distributed and recognition is often granted only on colonial terms. Drawing on decolonial thinkers such as Coulthard (2014), Witcomb (2002), and Spivak (1988), this part interrogates how institutions mediate Indigenous art and how diverse audiences respond, resist, or co-opt its messages.

Section A analyses museums, galleries, and public art programs as double-edged spaces: they can provide platforms for Indigenous agency yet also reproduce colonial logics through curatorial authority, funding constraints, and reconciliation branding. A close reading of Kent Monkman's interventions shows how artists exploit these very spaces to subvert canonical histories, codes and settings within museums. Section B turns to audience reception, deploying Hall's encoding/decoding model to map the spectrum of settler guilt, critical engagement, and apathy, while foregrounding Indigenous-led initiatives that transform spectators into participants.

By focusing on institutional frameworks and audience interpellation, Part III exposes the ongoing struggle over who controls Indigenous narratives, whose interpretations prevail, and what a genuinely decolonial art **ecology** might require.

A. The role of institutions in shaping the reception of Indigenous Art

The role of museums and galleries in shaping the reception of Indigenous art has come under renewed scrutiny in recent years, particularly in the wake of global protest movements demanding institutional accountability. In 2021, demonstrations erupted across North America, including in front of major museums, where Indigenous activists and allies called out the ongoing erasure, appropriation, and misrepresentation of Indigenous cultures (The Art Newspaper, 2021). These actions not only signaled public outrage but also highlighted a broader reckoning: that institutions long seen as neutral guardians of culture are, in fact, deeply implicated in the reproduction of settler-colonial narratives. In the Canadian context, where museums have historically framed Indigenous art as ethnographic artifact rather than contemporary cultural expression, the stakes are particularly high. Issues like access for the communities or even restitution are at stake. As cultural institutions in North America often serve as models for others globally, the way they handle Indigenous representation has ripple effects beyond national borders.

Museums, galleries, and public spaces as mediators of Indigenous artistic narratives

Museums and galleries are powerful gatekeepers of cultural narratives. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) argued that such institutions embody *"institutionalized cultural capital"*, effectively deciding which art is deemed important. In Canada, this meant that for a long time Indigenous art was largely excluded from the official art world. As Witcomb observes, museums were historically critiqued for their **"**associations with colonialism" and for functioning as instruments of "othering" Indigenous peoples "Like the old humanities, museums were critiqued for their associations with colonialism, for their hegemonic functions, for their practices of 'othering' minority groups, for their maintenance of elite cultural values and for the creation of a canon." (Witcomb, 2015). These venues long maintained an elite art canon: Indigenous works were often displayed as ethnographic relics or examples of craft, rather than as contemporary art on equal footing. In practice, this institutional context profoundly shapes how the public interprets Indigenous art from the way objects are labeled to how exhibits are arranged.

As discussed in the first part, over decades, most Canadian museums curated their collections to reinforce a Eurocentric narrative of history and culture. Indigenous artifacts were commonly framed as objects of anthropology, not living cultural expressions. This historical framing taught audiences to see Indigenous art through a colonial lens.

Contemporary curatorial efforts now sometimes attempt a dialogic approach consisting in inviting Indigenous voices into the gallery text and programming, but the legacy of the old model still lingers. Curator Bernard Lamarche illustrated this through the example the re-classification of seven Inuit baskets. He noted that the objects were *"doubly ostracized: filed as study collection and as ethnography"* until 2023, when they entered the permanent art wing. It shows how colonial shelving practices still shape how value is assigned inside national museums. Public spaces like museums inevitably mediate Indigenous stories: they can either perpetuate colonial perspectives or, increasingly, serve as platforms for Indigenous voices to challenge those perspectives.

Power dynamics in artistic recognition: Do institutions support Indigenous artistic agency or act as obstacles to radical decolonial expression?

On one hand, Canadian institutions progressively claim to support Indigenous art through exhibitions, grants, and positions. On the other hand, these same institutions wield great power over which stories get told. In an interview, Duffek and Wilson (2021) warn that even well-meaning museums "carry a lot of colonial weight that need to be redressed, but they're what we have" (Figure 1, 2021), highlighting the ambivalence of institutional support. Indigenous artists seeking recognition must navigate this weighty legacy. Often the stories or styles that museums choose to highlight are those that fit comfortable themes (for example, reconciliation or heritage) rather than more radical, unsettling ones. In effect, artistic agency can be constrained by institutional agendas: a painting that openly demands land rights may be set aside in favor of one that depicts "traditional culture" in a nostalgic way. This dynamic reflects Bourdieu's insight that the art field is structured by power. In other words, artists depend on institutions to legitimize their work (Bourdieu, 1984). Some Indigenous creators find ways to subvert this from within (as it will be demonstrated below with Monkman), but the basic fact remains that funding sources, curators, and exhibition policies all influence what decolonial expression gets shown and how it is framed.

The paradox of institutional inclusion: visibility vs. co-optation

Kent Monkman, *Hanky Panky* (2020)

Nothing illustrates the fragility of institutional "inclusion" better than the firestorm that followed this painting's release. In the baroque scene, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle and Cree aunties prepare a half-nude Justin Trudeau while ghostly prime ministers look on. Supporters read the tableau as a necessary inversion of colonial sexual violence. Monkman "makes the settler body the object of performative charity" (Hoffmann-Mitscherling, 2022, p. 46) yet mainstream columnists condemned it as an unacceptable "rape fantasy" (Angeleti, 2020). The speed with which liberal admiration for Monkman's earlier history paintings flipped to moral panic exposes Glen Coulthard's (2014) warning: state recognition is conditional, tolerated only so long as Indigenous critique does not puncture the settler self-image. *Hanky Panky* therefore exemplifies the paradox analyzed here as greater visibility can instantly regress into spectacle or censorship when power relations remain untouched.

There is a fundamental paradox when colonial institutions include Indigenous art: inclusion brings visibility but can also dilute critical content. As Coulthard (2014) argues, the settler state's liberal "politics of recognition" often serves to appease Indigenous demands without ceding real power. In museums this could look like grand opening

ceremonies or reconciliation-themed exhibits: Indigenous artworks are displayed, but often only under terms set by the institution. As curator Bernard Lamarche told me, MNBAQ has to respond to a government request of inclusion which doesn't necessarily target actions for Indigenous art's inclusion, but is actually broader, to include other minorities or environment-related issues. The institution may emphasize themes of harmony and healing, which can overshadow calls for land repatriation or self-determination. Cultural studies scholars have long noted this tension. Witcomb (2015) quotes Rhiannon Mason observing that a museum that "actively seeks to display multiple cultures and mark out differences" inevitably becomes a focal point for cultural critique. In other words, a museum can showcase diversity while still controlling the narrative. For example, when a national gallery organizes an Indigenous art exhibition as part of a reconciliation agenda, it may well draw large audiences and positive reviews. But critics point out that the language of reconciliation is often used to "rebrand…insidious assimilationist policies" rather than to produce change. As Christi Belcourt later noted, "Reconciliation is neither comfortable nor convenient, and it shouldn't be," "Reconciliation…is not even possible" without actual land return (Hogue, 2017). This illustrates how institutional inclusion can dissolve messages: on display is Indigenous art, but the institution interprets it on its own (often colonial) terms. The very act of mainstream validation risks recasting radical messages as safe cultural heritage. Museums and galleries are sites of both resistance and reproduction: Indigenous art appear there, but they can also co-opt it into the existing colonial framework. Discussing it with the curators interviewed, I understood that the word of decolonization or reconciliation were not really used within their institutions. Instead, they highlighted the importance of concrete actions. For instance, while discussing with Bernard Lamarche told me the importance to requalify the collection by "creating holes, acquire pieces that re-qualify the collection, that question it" instead of filling "gaps". His phrase resonates with Coulthard's (2014) warning that mere inclusion can reinforce settler frameworks. Instead, acquiring disruptive works like Jobena Petonoquot's *Indian Doll* signals a curatorial turn toward unsettling the canon.

Case study: Kent Monkman's subversion of museum narratives and settings

Kent Monkman, *History is Painted by the Victors*, 2013

Kent Monkman exemplifies how Indigenous artists use museum spaces to flip colonial narratives. He is renowned for his large "history painting" scale works that inject Indigenous perspectives into classic Western genres. As Kate Brown notes, Monkman's canvases are "epic, genre-bending canvases that challenge dominant historical narratives and reframe them through Indigenous and queer perspectives" (Manalili, 2025). Central to his subversion is the figure of Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. Clad in high heels and speaking Indigenous worldviews, Miss Chief appears in familiar colonial scenes, thereby "destabiliz[ing] settler-colonial perspectives" (Manalili, 2025). In effect, Monkman forces museums and their visitors to recognize the Indigenous presence often erased from history paintings as illustrated earlier through *mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People)* series, painted for New York's Metropolitan Museum which "directly confronted the institution's colonial legacies" (Manalili, 2025) by depicting Indigenous voyagers reclaiming their history. Through his work, Monkman demonstrates that artists can use the authority of museums against themselves, making the museum floor a stage for powerful decolonial critique.

Beyond representations, *The Rise and Fall of Civilization* (2015) pushes Monkman's critique from canvas to gallery architecture itself. Installed at Toronto's Gardiner Museum, the work restages a Victorian diorama: life-size white-porcelain bison, potent symbols of both colonial luxury and ecological devastation, plunge off a cliff, smashing into shards across the gallery floor, while Miss Chief conducts from the precipice. Visitors observe the wreckage from a gilt balcony, literally occupying the elevated viewpoint once reserved for colonial scientists, only to discover that the authoritative display vocabulary has been sabotaged. Motion sensors trigger the crunch of porcelain under hoofbeats; wall labels mix Cree and curatorial jargon, destabilizing the museum's truth-claims. By appropriating and then wrecking the diorama, an emblem of imperial pedagogy, Monkman enacts what Witcomb (2002) terms a "dialogic museum," answering Smith's (1999) call for Indigenous protocols that unsettle colonial exhibition norms. The piece thus extends the case study beyond narrative critique to a full-blown reprogramming of **museological** space, preparing the ground for the decolonizing strategies discussed in the next subsection.

Kent Monkman, *Rise and Fall of Civilization*, 2015

B. Audience engagement and cultural interpellation

Audiences do not receive Indigenous art uniformly, but their reactions are shaped by cultural background and perspective. Hall's encoding/decoding model (1973) shows how viewers actively interpret any text or artwork through their own frames. A dominant or preferred decoding by a mainstream audience might accept an artist's intended message, whereas a negotiated decoding blends the message with personal context, and an oppositional decoding outright challenges the message (Hall, 1973). Thus, the same Indigenous artwork can evoke pride and affirmation in one viewer and confusion or resistance in another.

Who engages with Indigenous art, and how do different audiences interpret it?

Indigenous people themselves (elders, artists, community members and youth) are primary audiences for Indigenous art. These viewers can see art as a form of cultural affirmation and continuity. Exhibitions can become sites of reconnection, where Indigenous visitors feel recognized and see their histories centered. Because the artwork often contains layered Indigenous meanings (stories of land, kinship, spirituality), Indigenous audiences may decode symbols in relational or sacred ways unfamiliar to outsiders.

Non-Indigenous (settler) audiences form another significant group. Their responses vary widely among those who are sensitive to it. Some attend out of genuine interest, curiosity, or a sense of responsibility to learn about Indigenous culture. Others may approach with indifference or token curiosity, treating art as mere "cultural decoration." Among those who do engage, interpretations often reflect settler perspectives: for example, a beautiful landscape painting might be read as an idyllic portrayal of "untouched nature" (a dominant reading) without recognizing the work's political resonance. Settler viewers may also experience guilt or defensiveness. Some feel inspired to learn more ("critical engagement"), others prefer a reassuring narrative (focusing on cultural revitalization themes), and a few remain disengaged, seeing the works as symbols of the past.

International visitors and diaspora audiences can bring yet another lens. Some Indigenous people from other regions recognize parallels in colonial history and feel solidarity, interpreting the art in a pan-Indigenous context. Non-Indigenous tourists, meanwhile, might exoticize the works or compare them to Indigenous art in their own countries. For any audience, prior knowledge and ideology play a role: education about Canadian history or involvement in reconciliation initiatives often leads to a more nuanced

decoding of Indigenous art, while ignorance can result in superficial or dominant readings. Depending on who engages, Indigenous, settler, or international, social standpoint profoundly influence how the art is understood.

Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model: settler guilt, critical engagement, or apathy?

Hall (1973) helps explain these varied receptions. In a dominant reading, a settler viewer might see an Indigenous exhibition as evidence of Canada's multicultural progress (perhaps feeling reassured that "we are learning") and give little thought to its more challenging implications. In a negotiated reading, the viewer recognizes historical injustices depicted in the art but interprets them through a personal lens, for instance, admiring the craftsmanship while feeling urged toward modest support of reconciliation. An oppositional reading, most common among Indigenous or very critically-minded viewers is one in which the audience decodes the art as a critique of colonialism that they fundamentally accept or even embrace. This tripartite model (although it should not be reduced to) predicts that some settler viewers will experience "settler guilt" or shame upon confronting colonial themes, leading them to support the message, while others may experience defensive apathy or redirect the meaning to avoid discomfort.

For example, a painting about land dispossession might provoke a settler viewer either to acknowledge past wrongs (negotiated reading) or to reframe the painting as simply depicting history (dominant reading). Indigenous viewers, by contrast, are more likely to see such a painting as an empowered reclaiming of their narrative (oppositional reading). Hall's framework reminds us that understanding reception requires looking at power and position: a viewer's social identity influences whether they feel confronted, complicit, moved to action, or unmoved by the artwork. In practice, cultural institutions find that some audiences do indeed engage deeply (participating in talks or workshops), while others view Indigenous art without critically reflecting on its messages.

How Indigenous-led initiatives shape new audience experiences

In recent years, many Indigenous individuals and organizations have taken charge of how their art is presented. Indigenous-led galleries, artist-run centers, and collaborative projects are creating exhibition spaces that prioritize Indigenous perspectives. These initiatives often transform audience engagement from passive viewing to active participation. For instance, Duffek and Wilson report that participants in the "Where the

Power Is" exhibition emphasized "the agency of Indigenous ancestors" in the artworks and their potential for "restoring and reclaiming cultural and political systems" (Figure 1, 2021). Similarly, when sacred objects are repatriated from museums, their reintroduction into ceremony shows "the vitality of connection," as Duffek notes museum-held items can once again "be activated as they continue to function" in community life (Figure 1, 2021).

These examples illustrate a shift in audience experience. When an exhibit is co-curated by Indigenous people, it may include Indigenous languages, ceremonies, music, or community-run programs. Visitors are invited to listen and learn, rather than merely observe. Indigenous viewers often find these spaces affirming; they hear familiar values and realize their participation is expected through, for example, attending a workshop alongside elders. Non-Indigenous viewers in such settings may find the encounter more immersive and personal, but also might feel challenged to step outside the usual museum frame. Overall, Indigenous-led curatorial practices encourage visitors to engage with the art as part of a living tradition, altering the usual spectator-object relationship.

Case study: reactions to Christi Belcourt's environmental and cultural advocacy

Michif artist Christi Belcourt integrates art and activism in ways that deeply affect audiences. Her stylized works of flora and fauna carry messages about environmental stewardship and Indigenous knowledge. A striking example is *Water is Life* (2016), a poster depicting a pregnant Indigenous woman holding water, with the words "Water is Life" above her. Members of Belcourt's Onaman Collective have silkscreened this image onto banners and mailed them to water protectors across North America (Hogue, 2017). As curator Tarah Hogue observes, this design "circulates in significant contexts beyond the art world". It has become a rallying symbol in Indigenous-led protests. Belcourt's poster explicitly references the Lakota water-protection slogan *Mni Wiconi*, and her depiction of a "Thunderbird baby" filling the womb with water underscores that water is alive and sacred (Hogue, 2017). For many viewers, especially those involved in environmental or Indigenous rights activism, the image affirms a shared belief that water must be protected.

Belcourt's commitment to advocacy also shapes how audiences react to her work. Indigenous community members often respond with pride and empowerment, seeing their concerns and values reflected in powerful imagery. Settler Canadian audiences, when confronted with Belcourt's art and statements, can experience a range of emotions. Belcourt herself has been outspoken: in public addresses she declared that **"**Reconciliation…is not even possible" without actual land return, and she accused politicians of using the word "reconciliation" to rebrand "insidious assimilationist policies" (Hogue, 2017). These remarks coupled with her art compel audiences to engage with difficult truths. Some settler viewers find themselves moved to learn and act (a negotiated reading), while others may feel defensive or minimize her message (dominant reading). *Water is Life* poster and other works have appeared in mainstream exhibitions, youth workshops, and protest sites, prompting many people (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) to ask how they can be part of the solution. Made available for free online for printing on Onaman Collective's website[11], this image has been used widely by Indigenous water-protection movements across North America (Hogue, 2017).

Christi Belcourt, *Water is Life*, 2016

In sum, Belcourt's case shows that art explicitly tied to decolonial action can provoke a high level of audience interpellation: it invites viewers to take a stance on environmental justice and Indigenous rights, rather than simply admire a painting for its sole aesthetic.

[11] Banners downloadable on: http://onamancollective.com/murdoch-belcourt-banner-downloads/

C. Decolonizing museum practices: challenges and strategies

Museums were born of colonial enterprises and still embody their logic. As Vergès[12] observes, Western museums "attempt to obscure or erase… their own founding pillars of extermination, wealth extraction and privatization," and cannot simply be reformed. They must be fundamentally "disordered" to break free from colonial narratives (Jilani, 2024). Indeed, traditional museum exhibits are built on linear, one-way narratives determined by curators, which serve imperialist and nation-building ideologies (Witcomb, 2002). Objects have been collected and presented as tokens of "vanishing" cultures, effectively silencing living Indigenous epistemologies. These strong linear narratives make "equitable social representation" nearly impossible, "binding museums to their historical role in the processes of imperialism, colonialism and nation-building" (Witcomb, 2002). Smith (2021) extends this critique by reminding us that archives, and by extension museums, are themselves cultural constructs: they not only "contain artefacts of culture," they *are* artifacts of a colonial mindset. In short, the museum's collections and labels have long tokenized Indigenous cultures and reinforced a European "cognitive and epistemological empire".

At the same time, Indigenous curators and artists have increasingly asserted control over their representation. Major exhibitions such as *Sakahān: International Indigenous Art* in 2013 and *Close Encounters* in 2011 have built on earlier Indigenous-led projects to insist that Indigenous art belong at the center of public institutions. As one curatorial history notes, these projects argued that "not only does contemporary Indigenous artwork deserve consideration within major public arts institutions, but the terms of inclusion, as well as the process of cultural identification, lies within the artists and curators themselves" (Lockyear, 2014, p. 102). This shift often tied to postcolonial theory in the 1990s placed Indigenous knowledge and community practice "at the heart" of exhibition-making. Such steps reflect the growing agency of Indigenous curators, who are actively "negotiat[ing]… physical and discursive spaces" for Indigenous art. In practice, Indigenous-led exhibitions often foreground relationships, storytelling and ceremony in ways that challenge colonial display norms. As curators insisted in the interviews, including Indigenous protocols and co-curatorship can transform a museum encounter.

[12] In a conference at Sciences Po Lille in March 2024, Françoise Vergès introduced her book *Programme du désordre absolu - Décoloniser le musée*. She mentioned decolonizing practices from Vancouver museums as being "inspiring" by the way they work with local Indigenous communities.

Even so, this agency has limits. Indigenous curators within institutions still face structural constraints. As interviewee Franck Miroux notes, "you can put Indigenous art in a gallery, but if you don't change the museum's hierarchy and mission, the colonial framework stays the same". In other words, adding Indigenous content without altering leadership, staffing or interpretive models can amount to token inclusion rather than true decolonization. Likewise, Bernard Lamarche observes that even donors may pressure curators to "soften" politically charged works for broader audiences. These pressures mean that radical themes like land rights, settler-Indigenous history or treaty obligations, are sometimes muted or sidelined in formal exhibitions, even as artists try to push boundaries. This tension is a persistent challenge: institutions may profess support for decolonization while still upholding their own mandates and collecting policies.

In response, many Indigenous communities are creating alternative exhibition spaces and programs outside of mainstream museums. Indigenous-led galleries, pop-up art spaces, and online platforms have proliferated, enabling new curatorial models. For example, virtual exhibitions hosted by community organizations allow artists to present multimedia, performative or participatory works in ways that a traditional museum floor often cannot accommodate. Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau in our interview emphasizes that "our people have always told stories communally," and these community-run spaces restore that agency. She notes, "Indigenous artists and communities are creating their own galleries and online shows; this gives us freedom to tell our stories on our terms, though we must stretch limited budgets". Community-based art spaces and artist-run centers similarly provide forums for decolonial art practice allowing installations that foreground ceremony, language, or protest like for instance the centers like daphne[13]. These initiatives often prioritize cultural continuity and local knowledge over commodification (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002) However, their impact is tempered by resource constraints and less visibility.

Case Study: Museum of Vancouver (MOV) collaboration.

In recent years the Museum of Vancouver has exemplified one model of institutional collaboration. MOV has partnered with Indigenous organizations to produce exhibits that center contemporary Indigenous voices. Notably, MOV teamed with the YVR Art

[13] daphne is a non-profit Indigenous artist-run centre committed to serving the needs of emerging, mid-career, and established Indigenous artists through exhibitions and associated programming, workshops, residencies and curatorial initiatives. daphne encourages a culture of peace through critical, respectful exchange with our Indigenous and non-Indigenous peers and audiences. https://daphne.art/

Foundation to present Spirit Journeys: Walking with Resilience, Wellbeing and Respect**,** a micro-exhibition featuring emerging BC and Yukon Indigenous artists (YVRAF scholarship recipients). The museum explicitly credited the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm*, Sḵwx̱wú7mesh and səlilwətał Nations as "Partners in Redress and Decolonization". MOV's Curator of Indigenous Collections and Engagement, Sharon Fortney, described the show as a "celebration of…talented artists," noting that the museum was "honored to showcase the work of these nine talented artists" and to acknowledge those who "inspired and taught them" (MOV, 2023). In a related example, MOV's *Acts of Resistance* exhibition (2020) showcased seven large protest banners created by Coast Salish artists during the Trans Mountain pipeline blockade. This exhibit literally brought Indigenous activism into the museum gallery, featuring firsthand testimony and multimedia documentation of the aerial protest. These initiatives illustrate how a museum can use its platform for Indigenous projects: MOV's strategy was to invite Indigenous partners to set the themes, rather than impose them. At the same time, MOV's collaborations remained within the museum's programming cycle, a compromise that satisfied donors but limited the scale of intervention. In sum, the Vancouver case shows both possibilities and cautions: museums can forge genuine partnerships and make space for Indigenous art, but only if they are willing to share curatorial control and address their own institutional histories.

D. Exhibitions as sites of resistance and counter-narratives

An exhibition's impact depends heavily on curatorial choices. How works are framed, the labels, texts, and sequencing, can either reinforce a dominant narrative or challenge it. For example, if Indigenous art is presented with standard historical captions, it may appear as a folkloric sidelight. In contrast, contextualizing pieces with Indigenous languages, land acknowledgements, or personal testimonies can foreground political meaning. Curators like Patricia Marroquin Norby argue that curating Indigenous art must involve "presenting [it] in a respectful, meaningful way that strives to uphold tribal sovereignty and culturally specific protocols" (Angeleti, 2021). This orientation can amplify the artwork's message. Conversely, exhibits that ignore historical context or present objects out of ceremony tend to neutralize them. As Witcomb noted, traditional gallery design often assumes a one-way flow of knowledge and privileges a single (curatorial) point of view (2002). By revising these designs, curators can resist the museum's passive approach for example, using circular layouts, community voices, or interactive elements. In short,

curatorial decisions directly influence whether an exhibition becomes a place of dialogue or merely a display of colonial artifacts.

This dynamic leads to tension between radical decolonial art and institutional constraints. Indigenous artists frequently create work that indicts colonial history, asserts rights, or revives suppressed traditions. One venue for this tension is the content itself: artist Kent Monkman, for instance, uses sharp satire and gender-bending imagery to confront colonial narratives. As seen in (I), his alter ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle "uses his own sexuality to support his goal of deconstructing imperial historical constructs," challenging Western misrepresentations of Indigenous people (Madill, 2022). In series like *Faint Heart* (2008), Monkman even repopulates colonial-era paintings with contemporary two-spirit figures, directly rewriting racist tropes (Madill, 2022). Curators report that outspoken pieces may be relegated to "education" sections or shelved for later installments. This illustrates a deeper question: can a museum, with its colonial roots, truly embrace art that undermines its own legacy? The fact that prominent Indigenous art exhibitions now routinely critique colonialism shows progress, but some artists and scholars remain skeptical that anything short of radical institutional change can satisfy true decolonial aims.

Despite these frictions, there are notable Canadian exhibitions that have powerfully countered dominant narratives. For example, *The Witness Blanket* (2024) at the Canadian Museum for Human Rights is a monumental installation by artist Carey Newman, composed of hundreds of objects donated or reclaimed from residential schools and other institutions. The museum's description emphasizes that the work "stands to bear witness to the victims and the perpetrators of violence" and "the resilience of Indigenous peoples and cultures". In practice, the exhibition centers survivor stories and Indigenous perspectives, forcing viewers to confront Canada's history of cultural genocide. Similarly, regional shows have gone beyond representation to resist hegemonic stories. MOV's *Acts of Resistance* project (as noted above) and smaller touring exhibits (like *Walking with Our Sisters*, a paired moccasins installation commemorating missing and murdered Indigenous women) have turned gallery space into sites of protest. Even historical exhibits are being rewritten; institutions like the Royal BC Museum and the Vancouver Art Gallery have enlisted First Nations advisors to overhaul Indigenous galleries, acknowledging that past displays "dehumanized" communities (Angeleti, 2021). These cases show that when galleries cede narrative authority to Indigenous voices, exhibitions can become transformative experiences that dispute the myth of a single national story.

The role of museums in decolonization remains contested. On one hand, critics like Vergès insist that the museum *as an institution* is fundamentally colonial. Inclusion or reform does not, by itself, undo the "death" of cultures that the museum enshrines (Jilani, 2024). From this view, only a radical reinvention, a "programme of absolute disorder" (Vergès, 2023), could truly break the cycle. On the other hand, practitioners argue that museums can evolve. As Norby observes, we are witnessing a "major transformation of historical proportions" where museums publicly acknowledge their colonial legacies and begin to share power (Angeleti, 2021). Our interviews reflect this ambivalence. Some curators feel that dedicated decolonial exhibitions and Indigenous-led governance signal real progress. Others caution that without continual community pressure, museums will slip back into old patterns.

Whether museums become allies in decolonization may depend on their willingness to act on these critiques. If institutions limit Indigenous agency to token exhibits or one-off shows, they risk perpetuating the very narratives activists oppose. But if they adopt demands for repatriation, Indigenous curation, and critical self-examination, as exemplified by the Vancouver collaborations and national projects discussed here, then museums could indeed become spaces of cultural solidarity. The voices of artists and curators in this study suggest it will take sustained commitment: "recognition is not the end of the fight" (Jilani, 2024). In the end, museums have the potential to support decolonial struggle, but only if they fundamentally transform their structures and relinquish colonial authority.

Conclusion

Throughout this research, we have seen how Indigenous contemporary art in Canada plays a pivotal role in challenging entrenched colonial narratives and influencing both cultural discourse and institutions. The first section of the dissertation outlined the historical trajectory and theoretical framework underpinning this study. It highlighted how, in the wake of colonization and its lasting inequities, Indigenous artists turned to visual expression as a means of resistance and storytelling. Early trailblazers like Norval Morrisseau broke through barriers in the 1960s, introducing Indigenous iconography and spirituality into mainstream art circles. Morrisseau's success crowned by a National Gallery of Canada retrospective in 2006, marked a turning point, opening doors for Indigenous self-representation in the art world. His achievement proved that Indigenous epistemologies (ways of knowing) could be conveyed through contemporary art on a national stage, inspiring younger artists and forcing Canadian artistic discourse to confront its colonial biases.

Building on this historical foundation, this mémoire engaged with critical theories of decolonization versus reconciliation. It examined Canada's official reconciliation agenda exemplified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and related its Calls to Actions, state initiatives, and contrasted it with Indigenous critiques. Scholars like Coulthard argue that a government's "politics of recognition" can be double-edged. When Indigenous cultures are acknowledged only on the colonizer's terms, for instance through superficial inclusion or rhetoric, such recognition may reproduce colonial power relations rather than dismantle them. This research found evidence of that tension. Many government-led reconciliation efforts, though well-intentioned, stop short of ceding power or altering institutional structures. In the arts, this can manifest as one-off exhibits or awards for Indigenous art that acquire positive publicity yet leave deeper inequities untouched. The case studies illustrated that true decolonial change requires more than visibility, it demands a transfer of agency and a rewriting of the narratives that museums and galleries present. Indigenous art, as shown in this dissertation, pushes towards that deeper transformation by asserting truths about history and ongoing colonialism that the official narratives often omit. In doing so, contemporary Indigenous creators embody what Simpson calls *resurgence*: a renewal of Indigenous ways of knowing, storytelling, and being, carried out on Indigenous peoples' own terms rather than those set by the state. This resurgence through art complements political and legal struggles, offering a cultural front through which Indigenous communities challenge Canadians to confront colonial history and imagine different futures.

The second section delved into the identities, myths, and social roles of the artists themselves, with a focus on Morrisseau, Monkman, and Belcourt. A key finding here was that Indigenous contemporary artists often inhabit multiple roles in their quest to reclaim narratives: visionary artists, knowledge-keepers, activists, and even curators. Each of the three principal artists exemplifies a different facet of this multifaceted role. Kent Monkman, for instance, engages in a deliberate myth-smashing and myth-making practice through his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle. This strategy not only contests colonial myths but also replaces them with empowered Indigenous figures. The dissertation showed how Monkman's work exemplifies "reclaiming imagery": using the very medium of European-style history painting to subvert its messages. His success in major venues like the Metropolitan Museum of Art demonstrates the potential of an artist acting as a cultural strategist. In effect, Monkman often operates as a curator of his own narrative. By placing his paintings in venerable institutions, he forces those spaces to engage with Indigenous perspectives. As he stated regarding his Metropolitan Museum commission, his goal was to *"reinsert… First Peoples' histories and experiences into the predominant narratives of Western culture"* (Griffey, 2019). This research found that such interventions can shift how museums narrate history, setting precedents for more inclusive storytelling.

Christi Belcourt provides another illuminating example. As a Métis visual artist as well as a community organizer and environmental activist, she uses her art to advocate and heal. Her paintings, rendered in painstaking dots that emulate traditional Métis beadwork which could be not only aesthetically striking for non-Indigenous viewers, but carry profound cultural and environmental messages. Belcourt often depicts the natural world with an emphasis on their sacredness and interconnection with Indigenous peoples. Section II highlighted how Belcourt's art serves as a form of resilience and education: it teaches about relationships to the land and critiques the harms of colonial resource exploitation. One of her well-known works, *Water Song*, for example, honors water as life and references resistance to pipeline projects, aligning with wider Indigenous environmental movements. Beyond the canvas, Belcourt has co-founded community-driven initiatives such as the Onaman Collective to transmit cultural knowledge and support language revitalization. Thus, her role transcends that of a gallery artist as she leverages art in service of her people and the Earth, embodying what an engaged, decolonial artistic practice can look like. The dissertation argued that artists like Belcourt are effectively melding traditional knowledge with contemporary form: by painting in a beadwork style, she bridges past and present, and by using that style to address current issues, she asserts an Indigenous futurity. This second part

showed that Indigenous artists embrace roles as storytellers and activist-curators of their own culture. They contest colonial myths and instead propagate new myths of survival, resistance, and hope. In doing so, they also navigate complex expectations, from their communities (to represent with respect and authenticity) and from the art world (to fit into or challenge artistic categories) and this research examined how they balance these often-competing pressures.

The third section turned to the reception of Indigenous art and the frameworks of institutions and audiences. Here, the research interrogated the role of museums, galleries, and cultural policy in mediating Indigenous art to the public. A central argument was that while Canadian institutions have begun to respond to calls for decolonization, they remain sites of contestation. On one hand, there is notable progress: major museums in Canada have hosted landmark Indigenous-led exhibitions like the National Gallery's *Sakahàn: International Indigenous Art* in 2013 and some have established permanent Indigenous galleries or advisory councils. Indigenous curators and directors are increasingly leading initiatives, pushing museums toward collaborative practices and repatriation efforts. Interviews with museum professionals in this study revealed optimism that change is underway, several curators pointed to successful models of co-curation and community engagement that have shifted institutional culture. For example, at the UBC Museum of Anthropology and the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Indigenous advisors have helped redesign exhibitions to foreground Indigenous voices and welcome ceremonies, reflecting what museum scholar Witcomb calls a *dialogical approach*.

On the other hand, the research critically noted the paradox of institutional inclusion: without deeper structural change, inclusion can slip into tokenism or co-optation. Coulthard's warning about the politics of recognition remains salient in this context. Simply putting Indigenous art on the walls is not enough if the underlying power dynamics stay the same. The *mémoire* documented instances where institutions celebrated Indigenous artworks or repatriation in principle yet continued to control the narratives tightly. Some Indigenous observers in the study argued that certain high-profile exhibits functioned more to ease settler guilt than to advance Indigenous self-determination**.** In fact, true decolonization in museums requires ceding control: adopting Indigenous protocols, allowing Indigenous curators to write labels and guide themes, and even reconsidering ownership of sacred items. A positive example is Kent Monkman's own curation of current would exhibition at Denver Art Museum, or his touring exhibit *Shame and Prejudice* (2017), , where he took on the curator's mantle to present a critical history of Canada from an Indigenous perspective inside museum

spaces. By doing so, he exemplified how an artist can demand institutional accountability to Indigenous histories. Similarly, Indigenous curators like Candice Hopkins have curated shows in Western institutions that flipped the script. Hopkins has observed that bringing Indigenous art to venues in Europe or mainstream North America helps "catch up" audiences on colonial history, putting the onus on institutions to educate their public (rather than expecting Indigenous peoples alone to do that work). These efforts align with Smith's call to "reclaim control over Indigenous ways of knowing" (Smith, 2021). Essentially, they are decolonizing methodologies in action, allowing Indigenous people to guide how their culture is presented and interpreted.

But as seen in this section through case studies, significant gaps and challenges persist. Institutional change is slow and often uneven. Some museum professionals admitted that bureaucracy, funding structures, and entrenched practices limit radical change. For example, museums may struggle with language by translating labels into Indigenous languages, or avoiding insensitive terminology, with timelines as Indigenous communities may need longer consultation periods than exhibition schedules typically allow, or with policy constraints like acquisition policies that still reflect colonial property assumptions. The dissertation ultimately found that whether museums become true allies in decolonization depends on their willingness to act on these critiques. If Indigenous agency is limited to occasional token exhibitions, the underlying colonial narrative remains intact. But if museums undertake deeper reforms such as committing to repatriation of stolen objects, hiring Indigenous curatorial staff in leadership roles, and embedding reflexive critique of colonialism in their programming then these institutions can transform into spaces of genuine reconciliation and education. In summary, the third part underscored a hopeful but cautious view: Indigenous art is gradually reshaping institutions, yet enduring change demands sustained pressure and the reimagining of museum practices from the ground up. The voices of artists and curators in this research make clear that decolonizing the arts is an ongoing process, one that requires vigilance, humility, and a redistribution of authority from colonizer to colonized.

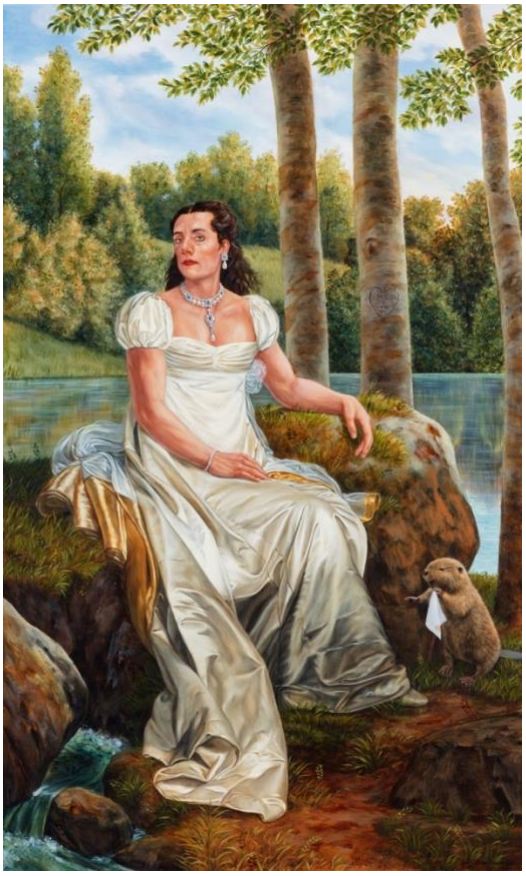
This research was not only an academic inquiry for me, but also a deeply personal and professional journey. As someone aspiring to work in cultural institutions, I was driven by a desire to understand how I, as a future cultural professional, can contribute to decolonizing institutions practices. My motivation stems from both an intellectual engagement with postcolonial theory and a visceral reaction to what I have observed in

museums as a visitor. I am aware of my position as a non-Indigenous student benefiting from colonial-era institutions. And this position compels me to use any platform I have to advocate for change. The aim of this research was therefore rooted in a personal commitment: to ensure that wherever I work in the future I carry forward the lessons learned about inclusivity, respect, and the necessity of Indigenous leadership in representing Indigenous cultures. Writing this dissertation has reaffirmed my conviction that cultural institutions must evolve beyond colonial frameworks. As I analyzed the successes and failures of Canadian institutions in embracing Indigenous art, I found many lessons applicable to Europe. For example, the practice of co-curation with Indigenous communities, which is gaining ground in Canada, could profoundly benefit European museums holding Indigenous collections. Rather than European curators unilaterally deciding how to display a ceremonial mask from British Columbia or an Inuit carving, why not invite members of the originating nation to collaborate on the exhibit or, if possible, to have the item returned? Such questions will guide my professional ethos.

In practical terms, this means I intend to advocate for concrete changes in museum practice: adopting culturally appropriate language (no more reductive terms or offensive categorizations on labels), providing space for Indigenous narratives (through community-curated exhibits or artist residencies), and pressing for provenance research and repatriation of objects. My professional project is anchored in the belief that museums can transform from sites of colonial memory into spaces of dialogue and solidarity. The research presented here has given me both inspiration and caution. I am inspired by the Indigenous artists and curators, or like the staff at the Louvre-Lens who took the step of integrating an Indigenous artwork into their core exhibition. These examples show that change *is* possible when individuals within institutions are committed. At the same time, I am cautious and realistic: institutions have inertia, and it often takes persistent effort to shift course. My resolve, strengthened by this research, is to be part of that persistent effort. Whether in Europe, Canada or elsewhere, I will carry with me the understanding that reconciliation must be more than a buzzword it must be a practice lived daily in how we operate cultural spaces.

Indigenous art in European institutions: presence and gaps

While the focus of this *mémoire* was on the Canadian context, the issues explored have global resonance, particularly in Europe, where vast collections of Indigenous art and artifacts reside, often legacies of colonialism. In this concluding reflection, it is important to consider how Indigenous contemporary art is or isn't being represented in European institutions. The current landscape in Europe shows a mix of incremental progress and significant gaps. On the one hand, there are encouraging signs of change. The Louvre-Lens, for example, recently undertook a reimagining of its flagship exhibition, the Galerie du Temps (Gallery of Time), which is an innovative chronological display of artworks spanning different civilizations. In its new selection unveiled in 2024, the Louvre-Lens included Kent Monkman's *The Pariah* (2017) alongside European masters and other global works[14]. This inclusion is symbolically powerful. By placing an Indigenous Canadian artwork in that narrative, the Louvre-Lens effectively acknowledges that Indigenous history is an integral part of world history. Such steps can help break the traditional Eurocentric canon, which for too long excluded or segregated Indigenous creations. Similarly, institutions like the British Museum or the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge have hosted exhibits in recent years highlighting contemporary Indigenous voices (often in dialogue with historical collections).



Kent Monkman, *The Pariah*, 2017

Yet, these positive examples remain relatively rare and do not erase the larger pattern in Europe, where Indigenous art from places like North America has largely been confined to ethnographic or anthropological museums. The Musée du Quai Branly (Paris), despite being a newer museum opened in 2006 with a mandate to honor the arts of Africa, Asia,

[14]https://www.culture.gouv.fr/regions/drac-hauts-de-france/politique-et-actions-des-services/pole-patrimoines-et-architecture/musees-des-hauts-de-france/louvre-lens-la-galerie-du-temps-se-reinvente-par-et-pour-tous-les-publics

Oceania, and the Americas, embodies both the promise and pitfalls of Europe's engagement with Indigenous art. It certainly provides visibility to cultures that the classic art museums of Europe long ignored with entire galleries filled with masks, totems, textiles, and tools created by Indigenous peoples. However, the presentation often strips these objects of their contemporary cultural context and authorship. Many displays still label items as "unknown artist" or "Indigenous group X," reflecting how colonial collecting removed pieces from their communities without recording the creators' names. It represents a stark contrast to how European artists are credited by name. Furthermore, the overarching thematic design of Quai Branly has drawn criticism for exoticizing its subjects: the famous "green wall" and meandering gallery path create an ambiance of a "primitive forest," which can inadvertently otherize the cultures on display. The museum has been critiqued as a *"postcolonial musée manqué"* (failed postcolonial museum) by scholars, pointing to a lack of self-reflexivity and insufficient involvement of source communities in crafting the narrative (Llorens, 2018). In essence, the Quai Branly's approach, while intentioned to elevate non-Western art, risks reinforcing the separation between European art (seen as evolving, authored, *Art*) and Indigenous art (seen as timeless, collective, *artifact*). This division is exactly what needs to be overcome. The research's insights into decolonial strategies suggest that European museums should move toward models of collaboration that blur the line between art and artifact, treating Indigenous creators with the same regard as European artists and involving Indigenous people in how their heritage is displayed. Encouragingly, there are initiatives afoot: for instance, France has begun discussions on repatriation of certain colonial-era collections (especially to African nations), and exhibitions that pair contemporary Indigenous art with historical pieces are becoming more common. But much work remains to be done to fill the "gaps", those absences of Indigenous contemporary voices, in European institutions.

A critical gap is also one of knowledge and engagement. European audiences often have had fewer opportunities to learn about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit contemporary art compared to Canadian audiences. Without exposure, there may be limited public demand in Europe for such content, creating a cycle where museums stick to familiar Euro-centric programming. Breaking this cycle will require visionary leadership and perhaps international partnerships. One idea is more cross-continental exchange: for example, traveling exhibits curated by Indigenous experts that can be hosted in European museums, or sister-museum relationships where institutions in Europe partner with those in Canada or Indigenous-run cultural centres. Indigenous curators take show to introduce Indigenous

perspectives abroad and I think these efforts should be expanded. In France, I feel a strong pull to be part of that advocacy to "connect the dots" between European institutions and Indigenous artists/curators from Canada. The presence of Monkman's *The Pariah* in Louvre-Lens is a great conversation point. It can pave the way for more Indigenous artworks to enter European public consciousness, not as isolated novelties but as an ongoing exchange of ideas. To conclude this point: European institutions stand at a juncture where they can either continue to be repositories of others' heritage framed through a colonial lens, or they can transform into spaces and cross-cultural understanding. Indigenous contemporary art, with its decolonial message, offers a rich opportunity for the latter, if only museums are willing to listen and open their doors wider.

Beyond visual arts: Indigenous resurgence in music and film

While this *mémoire* centered on visual arts, Indigenous renaissance in cultural expression extends across multiple media. It is worth reflecting on music and film as parallel sites of Indigenous artistic resurgence, as they reinforce and complement the decolonial trends observed in the art world. Indigenous music artists and filmmakers have been at the forefront of storytelling and activism, often reaching audiences that fine art may not. Their creative works echo many themes seen in paintings and installations reclaiming history, challenging stereotypes, and celebrating cultural survival but through sound and moving images. Music can then be considered a space of resurgence especially by reclaiming languages.

As for music, Indigenous artists in Canada have powerfully merged traditional elements with contemporary genres to both preserve culture and innovate. For example, Inuk throat singer Tanya Tagaq has revolutionized contemporary music by bringing Inuit throat singing into dialogue with avant-garde and electronic music. Her albums (such as *Animism*, which won the Polaris Prize in 2014) are not only artistic triumphs but political statements. She often vocalizes the pain of colonization (she's improvised pieces about missing and murdered Indigenous women, for instance) and the urgency of environmental respect. The success of such musicians on national and international stages[15] indicates a growing recognition that Indigenous voices have a central place in contemporary culture. For cultural institutions, this suggests the importance of incorporating Indigenous music and

[15] Polaris Music Prizes, Juno awards, or worldwide tours.

performance for instance, programming Indigenous musicians in museum events or supporting indigenous-led music festivals.

In the realm of film and television, a similar flourishing is underway. Indigenous filmmakers are using cinema to tell their own stories, often in defiance of decades of misrepresentation in Hollywood. *Alanis Obomsawin*, a member of the Abenaki Nation, is a pioneering documentarian who has spent a lifetime chronicling Indigenous experiences, from the 1990 Oka Crisis (*Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance*) to modern fights for justice (*We Can't Make the Same Mistake Twice*). Her films combine testimony with deep historical knowledge, exemplifying how film can be a tool for truth-telling and education. We could consider it as a cinematic equivalent to the decolonial museum exhibits discussed in this research project. Meanwhile, younger filmmakers are exploring new genres and reaching new audiences. The late *Jeff Barnaby* (Mi'kmaq) garnered acclaim for his indie horror film *Rhymes for Young Ghouls* (2013), which brilliantly uses genre conventions to explore the trauma of residential schools and Indigenous resistance. Barnaby's follow-up, *Blood Quantum* (2019), flips the zombie apocalypse trope into a clever allegory. In this film, Indigenous people are immune to a plague that turns others into zombies, a reversal of colonial disease narratives that also comments on Indigenous survival. Such creative storytelling carries decolonial messages in engaging forms, making people think even as they are entertained.

These examples in music and film underscore a main point: Indigenous artistic resurgence is a cross-media phenomenon. Visual artists, musicians, filmmakers, writers, dancers: all are contributing to a broad cultural movement to reclaim Indigenous space in the story of contemporary life. Each medium has its unique strengths. Music's emotional immediacy and film's narrative immersion help reach hearts and minds in ways that a painting on a wall (however powerful) might not. Therefore, in envisioning the impact of Indigenous art, one should adopt an expansive view. A painting by Kent Monkman in a museum, a song by Tanya Tagaq echoing in one's headphones, and a film by Alanis Obomsawin screening in a community hall are all parts of the same tapestry of resurgence. They reinforce one another. For instance, when a museum mounts an exhibition of Indigenous art, including a film program of Indigenous cinema or a live performance by Indigenous musicians can amplify the message and provide a richer experience. The conclusion we can draw is that decolonizing culture is not limited to any single format but requires a multidimensional approach. As such, those of us working in cultural sectors should seek to support Indigenous expression in all forms, recognizing that each form can

engage different audiences. By opening galleries to music and film, and conversely by treating albums and movies as cultural "texts" worthy of preservation and discussion like fine art, we break down Western-imposed hierarchies of art. This integrative approach aligns with Indigenous worldviews that often don't segregate art, song, dance, story but considers them all as threads of a living culture.

The overarching lesson of this research is that art and culture are not peripheral to decolonization, instead they are central. They hold the stories, the emotions, and the spiritual values that enable true understanding between peoples. Moving forward, it is incumbent on all of us; researchers, cultural workers, policymakers, and public alike, to support Indigenous arts not out of tokenism or trend, but out of a genuine respect for the worldviews and truths they carry. In doing so, we take steps toward a more equitable and enriched cultural landscape, one where the narratives in our museums, galleries, cinemas, and playlists include and celebrate the voices that were for so long silenced. Through continuous engagement, education, and humility, we can help ensure that the resurgence reflected in Indigenous contemporary art leads to lasting change in our institutions and, ultimately, in our relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

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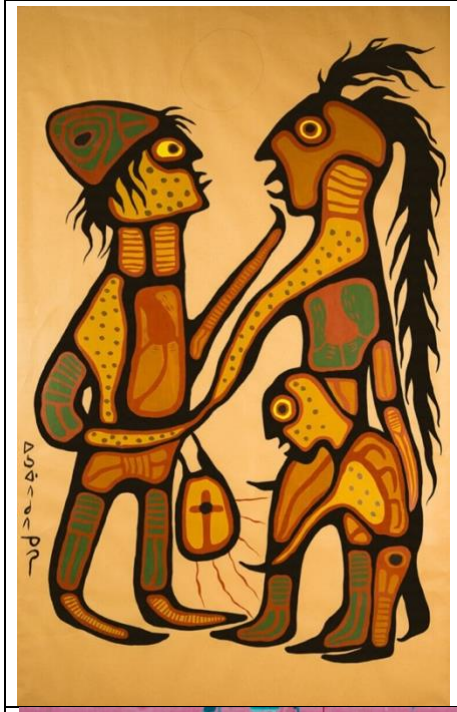
Appendices timetable

Appendix 1 : Artworks

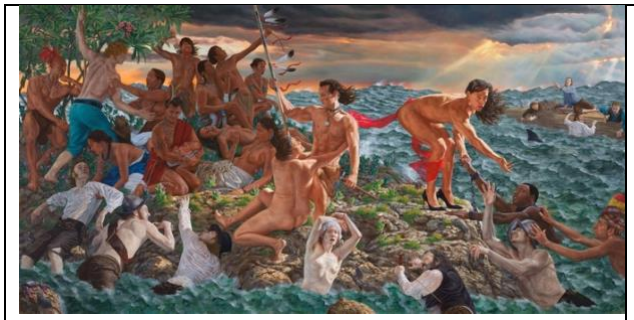
ARTWORK	TITLE	DATE OF CREATION	ARTIST	MEDIUM/ MATERIALS	DIMENSIONS	CURRENT COLLECTION/ LOCATION
	*Washington Crossing the Delaware*	1851	Emanuel Leutze	Oil on canvas	378.5 cm × 647.7 cm	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Minnesota Marine Art Museum, Minnesota
	*Moose Dream Legend*	1962	Norval Morrisseau	Oil on wove paper	54.6 x 75.3 cm	Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto

	*The Gift*	1975	Norval Morrisseau	Acrylic on paper	196 x 122 cm	Helen E. Band Collection, Thunder Bay Art Gallery, Thunder Bay
	*Artist and shaman between two worlds*	1980	Norval Morrisseau	Acrylic on canvas	175 x 282 cm	National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

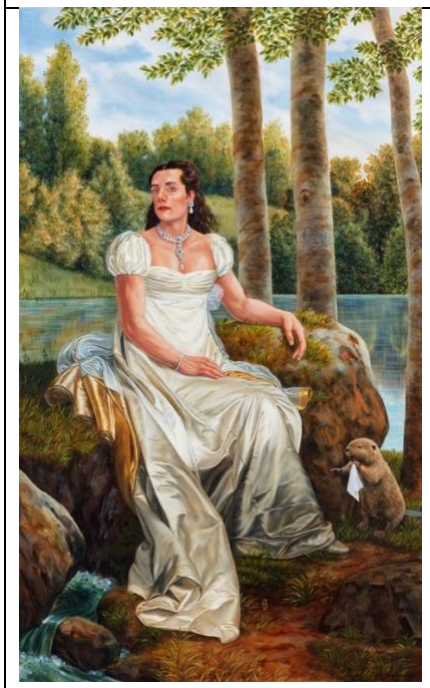
	*Reverence for Life*	2013	Christi Belcourt	Acrylic on canvas	121,9 x 121,9 cm	Wabano Centre for Aboriginal Health, Vanier
	*Water Song*	2010-2011	Christi Belcourt	Acrylic on canvas	201.5 x 389 cm	National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

	*The Wisdom of the Universe*	2014	Christi Belcourt	Acrylic on canvas	171 × 282 cm	Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto
	*Offerings to Save the World*	2017	Christi Belcourt	Acrylic on canvas	50.8 x 35.6 cm	Indian and Inuit Art Collection, Hudson Valley Moca, Peekskill

	*Water is Life*	2016	Christi Belcourt	Printable banner	x	x
	*Seeing Red*	2014	Kent Monkman	Acrylic on canvas	213.4 × 320 cm	Private collection

	*mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People): Welcoming the Newcomers*	2019	Kent Monkman	Acrylic on canvas	335.3 x 670.6 cm	Denver Art Museum, Denver
	*mistikôsiwak (Wooden Boat People): Resurgence of the People*	2019	Kent Monkman	Acrylic on canvas	335.3 x 670.6 cm	Denver Art Museum, Denver

	*The Scream*	2017	Kent Monkman	Acrylic on canvas	213.4 x 335.3 cm	Denver Art Museum, Denver
	*History is Painted by the Victors*	2013	Kent Monkman	Acrylic on canvas	182.9 x 287.7 cm	Denver Art Museum, Denver

	*The Rise and Fall of Civilization*	2015	Kent Monkman	Mixed-media		Glenbow Museum, Calgary
	*The Pariah*	2017	Kent Monkman	Acrylic on canvas	152.4 cm x 91.4 cm	Louvre-Lens, Lens

Appendix 2: Profile of interviewees

NAME AND SURNAME	FUNCTION / PROFESSION	INSTITUTIONS	ONLINE INTERVIEW DATE
Franck Miroux	Teacher and scholar	Pau University	02/14/2025
Bernard Lamarche	Curator of contemporary art (from 2000)	Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec	03/03/2025
Karen Duffek	Curator, Contemporary Visual Arts + Pacific Northwest Department Head, Curatorial + Design, Engagement + Programming Associate Member, Department of Anthropology, UBC	Museum of Anthropology at UBC, Vancouver	02/27/2025
Virginia Pesemapeo Bordeleau	Artist, Author, Painter, Curator	Independant	03/19/2025

Appendix 3: Interview with Bernard Lamarche, curator of contemporary art (from 2000) at Musée national des beaux-arts de Québec. (Transcript)

3rd March 2025, online interview (Teams)

Zoe

Est-ce que vous pourriez commencer par vous présenter, s'il vous plaît ?

Bernard

Alors oui, Bernard Lamarche, je suis conservateur de l'art contemporain au Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec et la période dont je m'occupe en particulier, c'est 1960 à aujourd'hui.

Zoe

Très bien, donc on va commencer par une question pour introduire plutôt par rapport à mon thème de recherche. C'est la première question que j'avais, par rapport à la notion qui revient souvent de décolonisation. Est-ce que vous avez une définition commune au sein de l'institution ? Est-ce que vous utilisez ce terme dans le cadre de la programmation et aussi de la conservation et dans vos pratiques ?

Bernard

Très vaste question. En toute honnêteté, il n'y a pas de définition officielle que le musée a adoptée. J'ai vérifié auprès de l'éducation, ce n'est pas le cas. Auprès des expositions, c'est la même chose. Le musée n'a pas adopté une telle définition qui nous permettrait de pousser la roue dans une direction unique. Ce qui ne veut pas dire que la roue n'existait pas.

Ce qui ne veut pas dire qu'on n'utilise pas le terme dans nos discussions et dans nos réflexions. Effectivement, le terme décolonisation fait partie constante de nos réflexions et nous amène à poser des gestes concrets ponctuels, plutôt qu'une vaste relecture ou une vaste réorientation de nos actions. Mais néanmoins, une série d'actions qui s'accumulent et donc qui nous permettent de démontrer du moins une sensibilité à la question de la décolonisation.

Ceci on ne peut pas en douter. Mais est-ce qu'on peut dire au Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec qu'on est en train de revoir l'entièreté de nos activités à l'aune de cette rubrique ? Ce serait faux de le dire. Cela dit, les actions qu'on mène et les gestes qu'on pose sont de plus

en plus fréquents. Je vous donnerai des exemples dans les prochaines minutes. Cela dit, si vous permettez, j'ai pris quelques notes pour être sûr de ne pas m'échapper. C'est sûr que ce processus-là est une remise en question des assises de notre collection.

C'est sûr que nous, c'est une collection de beaux-arts, donc il n'y a potentiellement pas de notion plus coloniale que cette étiquette, d'une part. Mais ça nous permet de repenser en partie nos structures, parfois les récits qui en émanent. Les collections sont en mouvance de ce côté-là aussi. Les pratiques muséales, de façon très ponctuelle aussi, ça nous arrive. Si je traverse un peu mes notes, du côté de la révision des collections, on a posé quelques gestes concrets de ce côté-là. Je vous en parlerai bientôt. Les changements de perspectives curatoriales, ça se fait lentement, mais néanmoins. La réécriture des narratifs, on avait déjà commencé il y a six ans environ dans nos nouvelles salles d'art ancien. On avait commencé timidement peut-être, mais néanmoins, à soulever de telles questions.

La collaboration avec les communautés, ça aussi, c'est très ponctuel. Pour ma part, je suis en contact avec, c'est peu, mais néanmoins vrai, un commissaire autochtone qui me guide beaucoup dans mes décisions. C'est quelqu'un qui est très, très, très actif dans la communauté, autant du côté des Blancs que des communautés autochtones. C'est quelqu'un qui s'appelle Guy Sioui Durand. Vous en avez peut-être entendu parler à travers vos recherches. La collaboration avec les communautés, je vous donnerai des exemples aussi. Forcément, l'accessibilité, la question de la déconstruction des hiérarchies, c'est peut-être celle qui est la plus ardue à revoir, parce que ces hiérarchies-là sont bien ancrées et bien profondes, surtout quand on aborde l'essence même de ce qui est notre mission, c'est-à-dire Beaux-Arts, parce qu'on est le musée national des Beaux-Arts du Québec. Donc déjà, ces deux notions-là de nationalité et de Beaux-Arts peuvent être vues comme antinomiques par rapport à celles des colonisations. Mais toutes ces notions sont remises en question lentement, mais graduellement dans l'institution.

Zoe
Oui, donc vous parlez d'une étiquette Beaux-Arts que vous avez, et c'est vrai que la notion de national, c'est vraiment des comportements, ça fait appel à plein de choses, des représentations aussi qu'on peut avoir derrière ces mots. Et donc, quels aspects vous pensez qu'il reste encore à travailler derrière cette étiquette de Beaux-Arts ? En quoi est-ce que le musée, il revête justement cette forme de colonialisme aussi à travers cette étiquette ?

Bernard

En essayant, disons, j'ai bien essayé de renoncer à certaines connotations qui viennent avec ces étiquettes de national et de Beaux-Arts. Pour ma part, en art contemporain, c'est peut-être un peu plus facile parce que depuis les années 60, les artistes contemporains remettent déjà en question les notions d'autorité, les notions de genre, les notions, les techniques, ça passe aussi à travers des recherches de matériaux. Et donc, les artistes autochtones, d'autant plus s'ils font appel à des traditions qui sont les leurs, je pense notamment à la question du perlage, forcément nous sortent de façon très directe du créneau dans lequel on est. Donc, de reconnaître l'importance de leurs contributions à l'histoire d'une institution comme la nôtre, c'est forcément renoncer à un créneau trop serré. Dans la période pour laquelle je travaille, c'est un peu enchâssé dans la réflexion même de ce qui est l'art.

Mais récemment, on a changé les catégories de sept paniers inuit, donc des paniers tressés qui sont surmontés d'une petite sculpture inuit qui était doublement ostracisée dans nos collections, c'est-à-dire collections d'études et objets ethnographiques. Donc, même pas dans la collection permanente et n'étant pas dans la collection permanente, c'est encore vu comme un objet ethnographique et non pas une production culturelle. Donc, on a recatégorisé ces sept paniers tout récemment.

D'ailleurs, ce qui est bien, c'est qu'ils sont en salle en ce moment, présentés dans une exposition qui s'intitule « Nous », vous allez voir sur notre site web, sur la notion de communauté. Et par contre, ça vient aussi nommer les limites de notre système d'étiquetage et notre système d'archivage parce que maintenant, ils sont plutôt classés dans la collection permanente, donc reconnus comme objets d'art ou objets culturels dans toutes leurs capacités, mais quand même affublés d'une étiquette qui les associe à « métiers divers » donc « divers métiers ». C'est pas que ça, mais la base de données elle-même est limitée de ce côté-là et c'est un travail qu'on doit faire, c'est un travail qu'on a commencé à faire, revoir nos catégories, les catégories qu'on applique à ces objets qui n'ont pas été prévus pour elles.

Donc, parmi les actions concrètes, on y reviendra plus tard, mais il y a cette redéfinition de la nomenclature même avec laquelle on classifie les objets.

Zoe

Et je me demandais, comme vous êtes le Musée national des beaux-arts, je me demandais si par vos initiatives ou par votre redéfinition de vos pratiques, ce sont des initiatives qui viennent de vous, de l'institution, ou est-ce qu'il y a aussi des évaluations de l'autre côté par une institution qui pourrait évaluer votre travail ? Est-ce que ce sont des commandes qui viennent plus globalement, qui sont faites au niveau national ? Est-ce que vous répondez à ça ou c'est plutôt vous de votre côté qui cherchez à faire ce travail de redéfinition, de remise en question ?

Bernard
Il n'y a personne qui nous y oblige. En fait, on est là-dessus depuis quelques années, six ou sept ans déjà. Il n'y a personne qui nous oblige. Il faut savoir qu'on est un musée d'État, donc on répond au gouvernement, mais il y a une bonne distance entre, c'est une société d'État, il y a une bonne distance entre nous et le gouvernement.

Cela dit, on répond quand même de plusieurs ministères, forcément le ministère de la Culture, mais aussi, est-ce que c'est un ministère ? Nous sommes que oui, du développement durable. Depuis deux ans, on nous a fixé des objectifs en termes de développement durable qui sont liés à la question de la diversité culturelle. Cela dit, ça ne pose pas strictement la question de l'autochtonie ou d'appartenance des artistes qu'on collectionne, parce que ça vise la collection exclusivement, cette nouvelle grille d'analyse, mais aussi l'art des femmes, l'art des diverses diasporas qui forgent la culture qui est la nôtre, et aussi les artistes autochtones.

Cela dit, il y a plusieurs artistes autochtones qui préfèrent, et je les comprends parfaitement, ne pas être associés à la diversité. En fait, c'est un non-sens d'une certaine manière, parce que leur culture, leurs pratiques sont bien ancrées dans le territoire depuis des milliers d'années. Donc, c'est nous qui les considérons comme de la diversité, mais il faudra aussi sortir de ce piège parce que c'en est un.

Et puis, on a des objectifs de ce côté-là, mais ça inclut, comme je vous le disais, l'art des femmes, les diasporas et l'art autochtone. Donc, il n'y a pas d'objectif qui est fixé par le gouvernement à ce niveau-là. Cela dit, pour nous, c'est une question qui se pose de manière de plus en plus urgente, parce que la société se transforme, parce qu'on a chacun nos sensibilités.

Et là, on a eu des formations, je vous donnerai des exemples tout à l'heure, mais on a eu des formations depuis 3 ou 4 ans régulières sur les cultures autochtones, les 11 nations fondatrices. La question des pensionnats, c'est cette horreur qui vient entacher l'histoire de l'art, l'histoire tout court, c'est une formation professionnelle. L'histoire du Canada, c'est régulier et de plus en plus fréquent, ces formations, ce qui nous permet à nous, les employés du musée et ceux qui peuvent avoir aussi une action directe sur les carrières ou sur la résonance de la culture autochtone dans nos collections et à l'intérieur des murs du musée, d'être de plus en plus sensibles à ces questions-là et aussi de faire en sorte que peut-être qu'on va être moins gauche dans nos manières d'aborder les pratiques autochtones.

Cela dit, les questions se posent différemment selon qu'on soit du côté, par exemple, de l'art contemporain, et j'en ai acquis passablement ces dernières années, ou de l'art décoratif, qui est déjà une manière de qualifier les objets de façon un peu... encore, y'a encore des réflexes qui les rabattent à des fonctions ou des réalités un peu secondaires. Puis à l'intérieur de ça, est-ce qu'on va considérer, par exemple, les fameux paniers dont je vous parlais tout à l'heure, est-ce qu'on va les considérer comme de l'art décoratif ? Ça serait nier, encore une fois, qu'il y ait toute une pratique ritualistique autour de ces objets-là, donc une existence qui n'est pas juste fonctionnelle et qui n'est pas juste esthétique, mais qui touche à des considérations symboliques. Donc là, on serait fautif de les réduire à si peu de choses.

Mais on est encore... ça nous arrive souvent de continuer à reconduire des catégories, des étiquettes, des rubriques blanches pour des objets qui ne sont absolument pas prévus à cet effet, et donc qui nous échappent forcément. Ça recoupe d'autres parmi les questions que vous avez.

Zoe
Oui c'est vrai. Et je me demandais comment vous faites pour évaluer justement ces nouvelles pratiques que vous faites dans le musée. Est-ce qu'il y a une manière de mesurer tout ça, ce travail que vous faites dans cet effort de s'adapter, de redéfinir encore une fois les codes du musée qui sont très coloniaux ? Je me demandais comment est-ce que vous les mesurez concrètement ?

Bernard

C'est une excellente question. Je considère toujours que les excellentes questions, c'est surtout quand on n'a pas de réponse.

Dans ce cas-ci, puisqu'on n'a pas systématisé notre approche, donc on n'a pas nécessairement établi ni d'objectifs, ni de manière d'évaluer l'atteinte de ces objectifs. Le gouvernement nous impose une statistique, c'est-à-dire qu'on a des objectifs, un certain nombre d'œuvres qui sont plutôt de l'ordre de diversité, inclusion et équité. Et donc on a des objectifs de ce côté-là, mais ça ne concerne pas strictement l'art ou les pratiques culturelles autochtones.

Donc, c'est très, très, très difficile pour nous d'évaluer même des objectifs qu'on ne s'est pas fixés de façon stricte. Cela dit, à chaque année, je vais prêcher pour ma paroisse, puis je vais parler plutôt de mon secteur, mais en art contemporain, jusqu'à tout récemment, on avait une catégorie supplémentaire qui était l'art actuel, donc de 2000 à ce jour. On a abandonné cette catégorie-là pour revenir à la dénomination classique de l'art contemporain de 1960 à aujourd'hui.

Je m'efforce d'une part de remonter dans le temps pour essayer de voir s'il n'y a pas des pratiques autochtones qu'on aurait, c'est clair, qu'on a probablement mis dans l'ombre. Puisque je m'occupe aussi de l'art qui se fait maintenant, à chaque année, j'essaie d'acquérir une ou deux pièces, quelques pièces, un certain nombre de pièces d'œuvres produites par des artistes autochtones et qui forcément questionnent les a priori, les fondements même de la collection. J'aime bien aller chercher des pièces qui s'adressent, bon c'est un anglicisme, qui posent très directement la question de comment est-ce qu'on collectionne et qu'est-ce qu'on collectionne et pourquoi est-ce qu'on collectionne.

Je donne un exemple, c'est une toute petite, c'est une poupée en fait que j'ai acquis pour la collection d'une jeune artiste autochtone qui s'appelle Jobena Petonoquot. Et en fait, je pense que le titre de mémoire, c'est *Indian Doll*, donc *Poupée indienne*. C'est elle qui a imposé ce titre-là, ce n'est pas nous.

Et donc, ce qu'elle a fait, c'est qu'elle a racheté dans une boutique de souvenirs une poupée « indienne » - j'insiste sur les guillemets - qu'elle a rhabillée avec des petits dévêtements en fait qu'elle a fait, qu'elle a confectionné pour cette poupée-là, mais qui correspondent davantage à sa culture à elle. Et non pas à tous les clichés, qui ressemblent plutôt à

Pocahontas, par exemple, et non pas à la réalité. Donc, c'est une toute petite pièce qui fait quelques centimètres, je ne suis même pas sûr que ça fait 30 centimètres de hauteur, mais quand je fais l'acquisition de telles pièces, je les aborde dans ce qu'elles peuvent amener à la collection et déplacer la collection.

Et donc créer des nouveaux espaces imaginaires dans la collection pour justement donner place à un imaginaire qui n'est pas que celui des Blancs, mais qui est remis en question par un imaginaire qui n'est pas le nôtre, qui n'est pas celui de la culture dominante, mais qui nous tourne un miroir qui n'est absolument pas déformant dans ce cas-ci, mais qui nous tourne un miroir qui n'est pas très positif par rapport à ce qu'on peut faire dans le passé. Donc, j'essaie d'aller chercher vraiment des pièces qui vont requalifier la collection. C'est une des manières que j'ai d'actualiser à même la collection les problématiques dont on parle aujourd'hui.

Zoe
Si j'ai bien compris, si on prend toujours l'exemple de cette poupée, vous cherchez à trouver une œuvre que vous projetez avec la réception que peut avoir l'œuvre et justement le dialogue que ça peut avoir directement avec le public. Et donc, pourquoi avoir choisi cette poupée ? Parce qu'elle cherche à déconstruire un stéréotype ? C'est bien ça ?

Bernard
Absolument, absolument. Et puis, il y a toute une rhétorique. La petite poupée est présentée sous une cloche de verre. Donc, ça reprend justement le discours colonial de la présentation des objets comme objets dits précieux. Mais elle le détourne complètement par notamment le perlage, mais aussi en réclamant pour cette poupée-là une réalité qui est beaucoup plus proche de la sienne.

Donc, effectivement, oui. Puis, c'est comme ça que j'essaie. Puis, en fait, toutes ces questions-là, toute cette réalité-là de la remise en question de nos a priori à travers une sensibilité grandissante pour la culture et l'art autochtone, j'essaie autant que faire se peut de l'appliquer à l'ensemble des activités de collectionnement du musée pour ma période. Forcément, ça ne concerne que ma période. La question se pose beaucoup moins pour ce qui est du début de la colonie jusqu'à 1900, puis pour la période moderne. Il faudra revoir aussi les choses, mais on était plutôt dans l'assimilation des peuples autochtones et dans une manière de les confondre ou les mettre dans l'ombre, plutôt que de les intégrer ou plutôt que

de nous questionner à partir de leur culture, ce qui commence à être moins vrai à partir des années 1960, puis encore.

C'est relativement récent, tout ça. Ce n'est pas très honnête, c'est très récent, toutes ces questions-là. Et moi, j'essaie de réfléchir non plus. Et ça, c'est moins spécifique à vos questionnements, mais j'essaie surtout de non plus aborder la collection en des termes coloniaux qui nous amènerait à combler des trous. On dit souvent qu'il y a un manque dans la collection. Toute collection est forcément incomplète par définition, mais on essaie toujours de combler ces trous ou d'aller chercher le chêneau manquant.

Alors que maintenant, j'essaie de créer des trous dans la collection et d'acquérir des œuvres qui requalifient la collection, qui questionnent la collection et non pas qui vont la compléter au sens classique du terme. Est-ce que je réussis ? On en reparlera dans 10 à 15 ans, quand je serai à la retraite. Mais c'est comme ça que j'aborde les choses. Et c'est vrai pour les artistes issus des diverses diasporas qui forgent le tissu social au Québec. Et c'est vrai pour l'art des femmes aussi. Cela dit, à chaque année, on se met des objectifs plus ou moins nobles d'avoir quelque chose comme 50% de représentation des femmes. 50% de… Puis à la fin de l'année, on est toujours un peu déçu parce qu'on n'y est pas arrivé. Parce que notamment, une de vos questions, et je la devance, c'est que les filtres qui sont les nôtres, forcément pas nécessairement ceux du gouvernement, quoiqu'il y a des incitatifs pour une plus grande ouverture. Mais encore moins pour ce qui est des collectionneurs.

Ça commence à changer, mais avant que ça percole vers les collections à travers des donations, on en a pour quelques années encore. Si des collectionneurs, puis j'en connais, vont se mettre à acquérir de l'art autochtone, souvent, ils vont peut-être se départir d'artistes blancs qui étaient dans leur collection, par exemple. Et donc, c'est eux-là qu'on acquiert encore.

Ils n'ont pas à avoir les mêmes filtres. Il y a un nouveau phénomène en Amérique du Nord, surtout américain, états-unien, je devrais dire. On sent le besoin de préciser des choses parce qu'avec tout ce qui se passe au sud canadien. Donc, de collectionneurs à activistes qui veulent vraiment forcer les musées à bouger. Au Canada, le Canada anglais, c'est un peu plus implanté. Au Québec, moins. Mais on commence à sentir cette action-là, on commence à sentir cette influence-là et c'est très positif. Par contre, avant que ça devienne plus courant,

il y a quelques années qui risquent de passer, le temps que ces collectionneurs-là absorbent eux-mêmes les pratiques auxquelles on prête de plus en plus d'importance, ou d'attention, je devrais dire, je pense, oui, d'attention. Puis avant qu'elles se retournent envers nos musées, il y a quelques années qui risquent de passer malheureusement. Cela dit, au Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec, les fonds d'acquisition sont plutôt minces. Mais quand j'essaie depuis de plus en plus et depuis quelques années davantage de faire en sorte que quand j'ai des budgets ou des crédits à dépenser, que ces crédits-là soient significatifs. Puisque là, on a le choix, faisons le choix d'investir dans les carrières d'artistes autochtones ou de femmes ou diasporiques. C'est ça aussi, c'est que chacune de ces questions-là, pardon, je recommence, pas des questions, chacune de ces réalités doit être sur notre radar. Et dans tous les cas, les musées risquent d'échouer dans une certaine mesure parce que d'une part, il y a un rattrapage infini à faire.

On ne l'aura jamais terminé. Et ce sont des scènes qui se développent de plus en plus, sur lesquelles on met de l'éclairage de plus en plus. Et donc, il faut travailler dans les deux sens, autant dans le sens d'un rattrapage culturel qu'une projection dans le futur. J'ai parfois l'impression que, je ne suis pas sûr que c'est la position de mon musée là mais ma position personnelle, c'est qu'on est voué non pas à l'échec, parce que chaque petite action, je pense, qui est noble et mérite d'être racontée, mérite d'être soulignée, mais qu'au volume, je vois mal comment et quand on va y arriver.

Zoe
Oui, d'accord.

Bernard Lamarche
Je ne veux pas être pessimiste.

Zoe
J'avais une autre question, vous aviez évoqué aussi l'exposition actuelle « Nous », et justement j'avais une question sur l'engagement du public. Honnêtement, je ne sais pas de quoi parle exactement cette exposition, mais j'imagine qu'elle cherche quand même à sensibiliser un public allochtone sur les enjeux du colonialisme au Canada, peut-être sur la région du Québec ? Est-ce que vous pourriez m'en parler un peu plus et me dire un peu les stratégies que vous aviez dans la médiation pour cette exposition, pourquoi pas ?

Bernard
Oui, c'est là que vos questions commencent à être un petit peu moins de mon ressort.

Zoe
Oui, j'imagine, mais de votre perspective, peut-être que vous pouvez en évoquer quelques mots.

Bernard
En fait, il y a deux cas de figure en ce moment. L'exposition « Nous » est une exposition de la collection qui a été menée de front, ce qui est une nouveauté pour nous aussi, surprenant que ça puisse paraître, une exposition menée de front avec l'éducation, la conservation et les commissaires aux expositions. Et c'est moins directement sur la question du colonialisme que sur la question de quelle est cette diversité qui forme nos collectivités aujourd'hui. Cela dit, en ce moment, en salle, on a jusqu'à la fin avril une exposition qui s'intitule « Early Days » « Premiers jours » qui est la collection d'art autochtone d'un musée en Ontario, donc à l'ouest du Québec, je ne sais pas pourquoi je me prends la peine de préciser ça, mais bon bref, en Ontario, qui s'appelle la McMichael. Allez voir, fouillez un peu. Et donc, c'est leur collection d'art autochtone, tout près de 200 pièces, si ma mémoire est bonne. Et là, il y a eu des efforts de fait, surtout du côté de la médiation. Ils ont suivi une formation que j'ai suivie moi aussi l'année d'avant, qui s'appelle piwaseha. En fait, le nom complet, c'est « piwaseha - culture et réalité autochtone ». Donc, c'est l'Université du Québec en Abitibi-Témiscamingue, donc au nord, qui a monté cette formation-là et nous, on l'a suivie.

Et ce sont des blancs qui la mènent, mais toutes les informations qui sont professées, ont été validées et recueillies auprès de nations autochtones. Autrement dit, le cours a été monté avec les nations autochtones, avec des représentants des nations autochtones. Et donc, c'est ce que nous, on a eu comme formation et aussi toutes les activités autour de cette exposition-là « Premiers jours » toutes les activités culturelles, tous les ateliers d'animation ont été montés en collaboration avec des personnes autochtones de la communauté de Wendake, tout au nord, tout juste au nord de Québec. Donc, ça, pour nous, c'est nouveau, mais c'est dans le cadre encore là. On disait, je le disais tantôt, on est moins dans… on est dans les actions ponctuelles, mais c'est des actions ponctuelles qui s'accumulent, qui font qu'il y a, qui font en sorte que l'immense navire qu'est le musée, va finir par changer de cap.

Donc, il y a un véritable engagement à long terme du musée, mais les structures, elles, doivent encore être changées. Et on a un comité qui a été mis sur place autour de l'exposition Premier jour, qui a fait ses premières rencontres et qui a commencé à travailler pour l'exposition. Mais on sait que c'est un comité qui va durer dans le temps et qui va continuer à aller chercher des expertises du côté des cultures autochtones et des personnes qui sont des professionnels aussi et des gens qui, de ces communautés.

Au niveau de la médiation, cette fois-ci, ce n'est pas tant dans la scénographie qui est à la fois classique et sobre que dans certains recoupements thématiques et qui sont tous listés. Allez voir, vous pouvez communiquer de presse, puis tout est listé. Et tout ça a été fait avec les gens de la McMichael, qui est une des collections les plus impressionnantes d'art autochtone contemporain au pays. Et pourtant, ce n'est pas la plus grosse institution loin de là.

Zoe
D'accord. Ok. Je pense qu'on a balayé beaucoup d'aspects. Je ne sais pas si vous avez des choses à ajouter.

Bernard
C'est bon.

Zoe
Parce qu'après, j'ai peur que, oui, ça ne soit pas trop de votre...

Bernard
Ouais.

Zoe
Sur l'engagement du public, notamment, je pensais à la notion d'espace, de musée, mais je ne sais pas trop à quel point vous êtes impliqué là-dedans.

Bernard

Pas tant. *(rires)* Non, en fait, c'est qu'on a une salle d'art inuit, mais c'est mon collègue Daniel Drouin, qui est notre conservateur de l'art ancien, donc du début de la colonie à 1900, qui était responsable jusqu'à il y a quelques années, qui était responsable de toute la collection d'art inuit, parce qu'on est la troisième en importance au Canada. Donc, c'est lui qui s'est auto-formé à travers les années comme spécialiste de l'art inuit, qui a mis sur pied une exposition qui est en circulation au Canada en ce moment, d'un artiste qui s'appelle Manasie Akpaliapik, qui correspond aussi à une acquisition massive de cet artiste. Donc, c'est lui qui avait été responsable de la salle d'art inuit. Et je sais qu'il avait travaillé dans cette salle-là, date de 2016, donc déjà huit ans. On est en train de revoir en bonne partie nos salles permanentes, comme tous les musées font aux cinq ou huit ans. Mais nous, on est en train de construire un nouveau pavillon qui va être dédié à Jean-Paul Riopelle. Donc, c'est là-dessus qu'on se concentre pour les deux prochaines années. Puis ensuite, on va continuer à revoir nos salles et faire en sorte qu'on puisse s'inscrire en même nos salles des discours qui prennent racine. Mais encore là, le visage public de ces mises à part les actions ponctuelles dont je vous parlais, le visage public de ces actions-là, c'est pas pour demain, c'est pour très bientôt, mais c'est pas pour demain.