Voices Through the Walls: An Introduction to Contemporary Aboriginal Art and Its Place in Canadian Museums

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History of Inclusion and Exclusion

When referring to Aboriginal art most people think of traditional forms and objects such as beadwork, masks, totem poles, etc. Beginning in the 19th century, these were predominantly exhibited as historical artifacts in ethnographic museums rather than as fine art. Since the 1960s, however, a series of quiet revolutions have been pioneered by Native scholars, artists, and museum professionals in order to develop the practice of contemporary Native art.

The Woodland School (or Anishnaabe style as it is now also known) was the first collective art practice that shifted away from traditional art forms. In an attempt to educate Native—particularly Native youth—and non-Native audiences, Woodland School artists painted renditions of cultural lifeways, simultaneously engaging with current issues and concerns and preserving traditional stories. This was a new concept for Woodland artists as much of their oral tradition was not supposed to be recorded or depicted.

Norval Morrisseau was the leader of this movement. His strategy was to “break with tradition to salvage Ojibwa beliefs,” (Fig. 1).

While these artists were “image-makers” and storytellers who tended to avoid confrontational issues it was the first step toward a more politically driven art. Seven artists, including Morrisseau, Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Alex Janvier, Daphne Odjig, Carl Ray, and Joe Sanchez, formed an association called the Professional Native Indian Artists Inc., otherwise known as the Indian Group of Seven, and promoted contemporary Native art as art, or ethnology. This period has often been called the Native Cultural Revolution.
Around the same time the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 was created, marking the first time in history that Native artists spoke openly and overtly about colonial issues.3

The late 1970s and 1980s proved to be a more politically motivated period in that Native artists were set on promoting awareness and the need for serious change. In 1978, the First National Conference on Aboriginal Art was held at Manitoulin Island in Northern Ontario. This conference was a meeting place for Native artists who otherwise had little opportunity to speak with one another. In 1985, this same group became a national organization called the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA).4 Funding was cut in 1996, thus ending the organization. However, during its existence, SCANA achieved significant changes, such as organizing a cross-country traveling exhibition of Native art and advocating that Native curators should curate native art.5

While progress throughout the 1990s continued to shape the mandate of Canadian heritage institutions, the battle was by no means over. The changes that did occur were delayed for an uncomfortably long time. The year 1992 marked the 500th anniversary since Christopher Columbus came to North America, stirring up quite a bit of interest around Native art and culture. Two exhibitions in particular are considered groundbreaking: INDIGENA: Perspectives of Indigenous Peoples on 500 years (Canadian Museum of Civilization) and Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada (National Gallery of Canada). The 1990s and 2000s have witnessed institutional changes in the fields of representation and the inclusion of aboriginal scholars and museum professionals.6 The Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Art Gallery of Ontario are two leading museums which commissioned Native artists to create artworks using actual gallery walls to convey the injustices and oppression Aboriginal people have suffered. The artworks are Alex Janvier’s Morning Star (1993) and Kent Monkman’s The Academy (2008).

**Alex Janvier’s Morning Star speaks to Parliament Hill**

Ideally located on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River with floor to ceiling windows that face Parliament Hill, the Canadian Museum of Civilization commissioned Alex Janvier, of Dene Suline and Saulteaux heritage, to complete a mural, leaving both...
content and the domed ceiling on which the mural would be painted up to the artist. While this commission is symbolic for many reasons, the choice of artist is particularly relevant as Janvier has been a leading artist since the beginnings of the Woodland style and was a predominant figure in the formation of SCANA. Furthermore, his involvement with the organization of the Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67 was unpleasant when he was asked to rename his abstract work of art which some believed conveyed negativity. He changed the title of his mural from The Unpredictable East to Beaver Crossing Indian Colours. His motto from then on, which procured many followers, was “to tell it like it is” and that is what he has done with his masterpiece, Morning Star.

The mural is executed in a very colorful and abstract manner without figurative content. The subject matter is Canadian history, told from an Aboriginal perspective. Separated into four colour-coded periods the history spans from pre-contact times to the present day. Each quadrant radiates from the central circle: the morning star (Figs. 2 & 3). According to Nancy Baele:

He [Janvier] sees the color chart as a way of poking fun at the rigidity of a codified color system taught to every art school student, and, by extension challenging the kind of criticism exemplified by Clement Greenberg, who judged works according to Eurocentric traditions and formal esthetic values.

Fig. 2 Alex Janvier, Morning Star, 1993, acrylic, 1900 cm diameter, Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Janvier chose the motif of the morning star because his Dene ancestors depended on it as a directional tool. The morning star symbolizes the direction towards unity and mutual respect between Native and non-Native people, first by agreeing on the injustices of Canadian history—which is done by retelling it properly—and then by finding a way to live harmoniously together. The idea of re-telling the true and often vicious Canadian history is quite controversial, but to go even further, Janvier chose the dome in the Grand Hall that faces Parliament Hill as his wall to paint the mural, creating a symbolic discourse between the artist and the Canadian government. Creating this sort of dialogue has become an increasingly common and powerful tool to promote awareness and instigate change.

**Kent Monkman’s *The Academy* speaks to the Canadian galleries at the Art Gallery of Ontario**

Fifteen years later, in 2008, the Art Gallery of Ontario commissioned Kent Monkman, who is Cree, to create an art piece in response to the new Canadian galleries which were built in 2005 to house part of Ken Thomas’ world-class private collection of...
more than 700 works of Canadian and Native art. Innovatively curated by Gerald McMaster, Plains Cree and a member of the Siksika Nation, the display includes traditional Native art such as Inuit carvings, Anisnaabe beadwork, and Haida masks, together with the works of contemporary Native artists like Morrisseau and Rebecca Belmore and Norval Morrisseau. These hang next to early Canadian artists Paul Kane, Cornelius Krieghoff and Emily Carr. Kent Monkman’s piece, *The Academy*, is inspired by both the Native and non-Native artworks placed alongside his painting (Fig. 4). By using both Native trickster humour and an academic, realistic style of painting, Monkman confronts issues of representation throughout art history. Including an obvious reference to the famous Vatican sculpture, *Laocoon and His Sons* and its influence on the western Academic style, Monkman also ties in characters from George Berthon’s portraits of Mr. and Mrs. William Henry Boulton located near *The Academy* (Figs. 5, 6 & 7). Further, next to references of early Canadian paintings Monkman depicts miniature wooden Native looking men, birch bark bags, Native masks, and a Morrisseau painting. The Native sources in *The Academy* seem obscured by these other references, exemplifying the misrepresentation of Native culture in Western art history. This curatorial practice of juxtaposing Native and non-Native art, as well as the initiative taken by the museum to commission such an outspoken piece like *The Academy*, encourages discussion about the falsehood of ethnographic displays over the last two centuries and the reality that early Canadian painters are partly responsible for the misrepresentation of Aboriginal culture.

**Fig. 4** Kent Monkman, *The Academy*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 182.9 x 274.3 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario.

Fig. 5  
Agesander, Athenedoros and Polydorus, *Laocoön and His Sons*, 1st century BCE (Before Common Era), marble, 184 cm, Museo Pio-Clementino.  

Fig. 6  
George Theodore Berthon, *Mrs. William Henry Boulton*, 1847, oil on canvas, 59.1 x 44.5 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario.  
Fig. 7  George Theodore Berthon, *Portrait of William Henry Boulton*, 1846, oil on canvas, 208.3 x 144.8 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario.


**Conclusion**

These dialogues within heritage institutions are indicative of the evolving inclusion of Native art within the Canadian story, a fact that has been misrepresented and neglected for far too long. In 1993, Alex Janvier suggested that we are witnessing a move toward “spiritual unity” between Native and non-Native cultures. Fifteen years later, we still have a very long way to go, but at least we are now committed to learning together, respectfully and with open minds.
Notes


2. These seven artists are known as the Indian Group of Seven for the sole reasons that the group consisted of seven Native artists. There was no intended connection with the Group of Seven. Jacinthe Soulliere, “The Stone that Cracked the Wall Between the Institution and the First Nation Artist: The National Gallery of Canada, 1980–2008,” (MA thesis, Concordia University, Montreal, 2008) 45.


5. For more information on SCANA, see: Soulliere, 45–61.

6. Soulliere, 16. Other changes include the formation of the Aboriginal Secretariat with Lee-Ann Martin as the appointed coordinator; the employment of Aboriginal curators in National museums, including the CMC and the NGC; Canada Council appointed six more Aboriginal officers; the NGC opened a contemporary Indigenous art department; and more than 120 Friendship Centres were formed across Canada. The changes continue today as the National Gallery held its first solo exhibition of an Aboriginal artist, Norval Morrisseau, the NGC also appointed two more Aboriginal curators-in-residence, and international conferences are held specifically to discuss Native art. See Logan, 73 and 81; Soulliere, 70; “Contemporary Aboriginal Arts in Canada,” *Arts Culture in Canada: Fact Sheet* (Aug. 2008) 16 Nov. 2009 {www.canadacouncil.ca/NR/...4333.../FactSheetAboriginalENG.pdf} 6 (Last viewed June 2010); and *Vision, Space, Desire: Global Perspectives and Cultural Hybridity* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, 2006).


