How to Move Towards an Era of Reconciliation and De-Colonization: Art, Museums and the Academy

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In 2015, The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, (TRC) concluded that Canada had committed a cultural genocide against the Indigenous people and published 94 "calls to action" urging all levels of government to work together to change policies and programs in a concerted effort to repair the harm caused by residential schools and their legacy.

It recognized the power of art and its role in reconciliation and today I will give you a glimpse of how this has affected change in the museum, academy and how we discuss art and cultural appropriation.
The artist collective the *Ephemerals*, have been working on projects addressing history, stereotyping and cultural appropriation for several years. *Trending*, staged at the University of Winnipeg in 2011, included an indigenous clothing display mined from the Anthropology Department’s historical collection and performances by the artists dressed in indigenous-inspired clothing from current retail fashion. Their intent was to question the representation of contemporary indigenous women in our globalized world and to bring an awareness to cultural appropriation.
“Quebec-made Ungava gin accused of cultural appropriation. Inuk Montrealer Stephan Puskase says company’s advertising, branding profit off Inuit culture.”

Appropriating Indigenous culture for fashion, team logos, and other products comes at a cost on many levels. The most obvious is the financial cost, as in the case of Quebec-made Ungava Gin and their campaign’s advertising, branding, all profiting off Inuit culture.
“Toronto gallery cancels show after concerns artist ‘bastardizes’ Indigenous art Non-Indigenous artist Amanda PL says she is inspired by the Woodlands style — and plans to continue her work.”

This is blatant in work of Toronto artist PL, whose exhibition was shut down amid controversy in 2017 because she was shamelessly appropriating the Woodlands style of Norval Morrisseau.
There was negative reaction because of her not asking, not attributing and surface quoting – basically aestheticizing from Morisseau, who himself views his paintings as icons and “images which help focus on spiritual powers, generated by traditional beliefs and wisdom.”
So, how does one pay homage to another culture correctly and respectfully navigate the “fine line between appreciation and appropriation?”
Here is a positive example of Metis artist Christi Belcourt, who was consulted by Fashion House Valentino to use her beadwork *Water Song*, which, like her other floral works, was inspired by the beadwork of Métis and First Nation women she saw as a child.
Bottom line: You ask and if the answer is no, you must yield to the group that has the most power to lose.

The cost and labour to indigenous artists when addressing cultural appropriation can lead to burnout as discussed by Angela Marie Schenstead in her 2018 article in *Canadian Art*: “the dichotomy of honouring family and culture while pursuing professional goals and having to advocate for indigenous rights within a Western-dominated art scene can be an exhausting experience for Indigenous art professionals.” There is a risk of exploitation to artists because indigenous art is often rooted in identity and place and this creates a tension between their responsibility to their communities through self-determination and institutions that have been historically racist and colonial structures.
She describes the exhibition “Red Rose ad Lidii” by Vuntut Gwich’in artist Jeneen Frei Njootli at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery as having one foot in the community and one in the institution and this notion is further asserted by the artist herself: “As indigenous artists, we maintain the right to withhold personal and cultural information as an assertion of sovereignty and artistic freedom in the face of colonial oppression- an act of protection against appropriation and abuse at the hands of museums and art spaces.”
Concerns about appropriation are now being implemented in the language, programming and grants made available by Canada’s publically funded granting institutions.

The Canada Council for the Arts have addressed the issues of reconciliation and decolonization in their strategic plan *Shaping a New Future for 2016-21*. “As a public funder, we are aware—of the deliberate attempts throughout Canada’s history to eradicate the cultures and languages of First Nations, Inuit and Metis peoples. We have an obligation and a responsibility to transform ourselves to better support Indigenous artists and communities on their own terms.” According to Steven Loft the Director of their *Indigenous Creating, Knowing, Sharing* program, they are now using a new system to evaluate how artist projects must align with the council’s commitment to respecting cultural appropriation. “What we want them to do is challenge themselves and to do things in a respectful, reciprocal manner.”
These protocols are now being applied to museums, who have historically discussed and displayed Indigenous culture through the anthropological lens, primitivism, and the salvage paradigm. De-colonizing the museum means to address issues of display, collecting and how we think about Indigenous art. This shift in programming and structure is visible at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, who by creating Indigenous curatorial positions have resulted in a string of exhibitions including *We are on Treaty One, Border X* and *Insurgence/Resurgence*. *Insurgence/Resurgence*, which was selected as the top exhibition for 2017 by *Canadian Art*, was the Winnipeg Art Gallery’s largest-ever exhibition of contemporary Indigenous art and included several commissioned site specific interventions responding to the physical space of the gallery itself – a four-story high canvas pinned to the front of the building.
changing shape of walls, applying Cree to the stairs and there was a range of media from traditional to tattooing, beading and tufting, and the work was about identity, kinship, land-based practices and traditions which “considers political insurgency and cultural resurgence to radically shift our understanding of Canada, now and in the future.”
In 2020 the Winnipeg Art Gallery will host the Winnipeg Indigenous Biennial with the initial exhibit *To Draw Water* “focusing on issues of sustainability, climate change and the environment through the Indigenous lens.” This will coincide with the opening of the new Inuit Art Gallery, which has had an Indigenous Advisory Circle involved in the planning since its inception.
Now let us turn to the Academy… By the fall of 2015, universities were beginning to discuss how they could implement the “94 calls to action” and one year later, The University of Winnipeg was one of the first universities in Canada to mandate that all undergraduate students take the Indigenous Course Requirement so that they will have knowledge about Indigenous peoples and their culture.

By 2017, 85% of universities and colleges were weaving Indigenous peoples, cultures and knowledge into the fabric of their campuses through re-designed spaces/buildings, gardens, symbols, academic programs and projects and the hiring of indigenous faculty and research chairs. To quote Associate Professor Shauneen Pete, at the University of Regina, “it is really about transforming the university at its very core [and] re-centering Indigenous world views as a starting point for that transformation and it’s a process of institutional decolonization.”
OCAD University has created an Indigenous Visual Culture Undergraduate program which includes many new Indigenous hires specializing in Indigenous knowledge, histories, craft and decolonizing traditional western histories of art and design. A future initiative between OCAD and the University of Winnipeg is to through a joint program to create more Indigenous professors of Art History- a need shared across the country.
Indigenous Methodologies: a mix of existing methodologies and Indigenous Practice

- Themes of self-determination, healing, restoration and social justice.
- Claiming and re-claiming land
- Testimonies
- Storytelling
- Celebrating survival
- Remembering
- Interviewing
- Indigenizing
- Representing and Reframing
- *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* by Dr. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, University of Waikato in New Zealand

Lastly, how can one be an ally? Even the term itself can be problematic because some see the label as a way for Settler’s to absolve themselves of guilt.

However there is a lot of labour involved and WE need to do the heavy lifting by educating ourselves – reading, researching and attending workshops that address issue of cultural appropriation and decolonization.
Working within a system inherently colonial in structure and reconciling Indigenous values requires indigenous initiatives and Indigenous methodologies that emphasize kinship, a connection to the land and will help to reclaim control over Indigenous ways of knowing and being.
Think about how indigenous perspectives can be incorporated into hidden curriculum. Medicine Wheel; physical space - think about how you configure your classroom – some place chairs in a circle to the redesign of classrooms, libraries and student centres.
Indigenous Terminology

• More than 600 distinct First Nation communities across Canada (Turtle Island/North America)

• Refer to indigenous peoples in the plural to demonstrate diversity.

• Acknowledge that the naming process is entrenched within colonial systems of power.

• The use of appropriate language, terminology and traditional names demonstrates respect and helps build good relationships.

Interdisciplinary Development Initiative (IDI) in applied Indigenous Scholarship, *Guide for working with indigenous students*. London: Western University. (nd)

Indigenous Terminology - Use appropriate language, terminology and traditional names to demonstrate respect and help to build good relationships.
Land Acknowledgements are cultural, political and spiritual practices.

- Learn about local indigenous communities, histories and treaties in the place where you live.
- Learn to pronounce local indigenous nations’ names properly in their original languages.
- Acknowledge long standing presence of indigenous peoples on your course syllabus and beginning of your classes.
- Affirms commitment to renewing relationships and reconciliation and may inspire meaningful action.

Acknowledge long standing presence of indigenous peoples on your course syllabus and beginning of your classes.
Traditional Territories Acknowledgment

• The University of Manitoba campuses are located on original lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and on the homeland of the Métis Nation.

• We respect the Treaties that were made on these territories, we acknowledge the harms and mistakes of the past, and we dedicate ourselves to move forward in partnership with Indigenous communities in a spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.

This acknowledgment is also used on U of M emails and web sites.

As librarians and educators we must acknowledge that there are Indigenous research materials outside of the library/institution because Indigenous histories/culture was an oral tradition and we must push for acceptance of this material. For example, a student may wish to consult an elder for an assignment.

If you have the opportunity to teach a course in art history or visual literacy, provide space for an Indigenous guest speaker. It is crucial that we give them a voice at every opportunity and at the very least in your information literacy sessions use examples of Indigenous artists and talk about cultural appropriation.
To conclude, I leave you with Kent Monkman, who offers counter narratives to Canadian history so they can understand the impact on Indigenous peoples. Curator Catherine Bedard described his work as the “reverse colonization of European painting.”
Picasso’s butchering of the female nude = what has happened to his people.
Here we see his alter ego Miss Eagle Chief Testicle, a gender-bending trickster inserted in Robert Harris’ famous paintings the Fathers of Confederation, and now FINALLY she has a seat at the table.
Bibliography


