

Why Museums Matter Episode 1: Introduction to Reconsidering Museums

Welcome to Why Museums Matter, a limited series podcast exploring the role, value, and changing public expectations of museums created as part of the national *Reconsidering Museums* project.

The Why Museums Matter podcast is produced in Alberta on the traditional and contemporary meeting ground and home for many Indigenous Peoples, including the Cree, Saulteaux, Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Tsuut'ina, Nakota Sioux, Dene, Inuit, and Métis Peoples. We respect that this work takes place on the lands of Treaties Four, Six, Seven, Eight, and Ten, as well as the Métis Nation of Alberta. We acknowledge the responsibility of working on these lands as museum professionals and citizens of this place. Guests are joining us from across the land that we now know as Canada.

Episode One: Introduction to Reconsidering Museums

Caroline Loewen: Hi, I'm Caroline Loewen, Project Lead for *Reconsidering Museums*. *Reconsidering Museums* is a national research and advocacy project that set out to answer the question, what do museums mean to Canadians?

Over the last three years, we have spent time listening to Canadians across the country from museum workers and volunteers to visitors and the general public to learn more about the role and social value of museums.

What we heard has been fascinating. Museums must be open to changing, not only the way that they collect, exhibit, and program, but also the way they approach governance, operations, human resources, and community needs, in order to remain relevant and sustainable. We've heard that it is time for museums to be courageous in leading that change. Over the next four episodes of this podcast, we'll share some of our findings as well the resources we've created to support the sector in responding to changing public expectations of museums.

Meaghan Patterson, Executive Director of the Royal Alberta Museum and former Executive Director / CEO of the Alberta Museums Association joins us to discuss the beginnings of the *Reconsidering Museums* project.

Meaghan Patterson: We started to talk with our colleagues at the different provincial and territorial museum associations across the country and everyone was basically, universally, in agreement that this is an issue that museums face across the country and that we know that is

important. But again, we really sometimes struggle to communicate that to our various stakeholders, whether that's visitors or government or funding agencies.

We really kind of struggle with why is that, what kind of tools do we need as a sector to help us better articulate why we matter? And what difference we make in the communities that we serve?

So essentially it turned into hearing from or wanting to hear from the diverse publics that we serve as museums across the country about why they value or don't value, love or don't love museums in the hope that we could create some resources for the sector to better articulate that value, bring awareness to the work that we do, and ultimately you know strive for the more sustainable future for the sector.

So, we came together as a national consortium of provincial and territorial museums associations and then ultimately, we engaged the Canadian Museums Association as well to partner with us on this project. It really, truly became a national project.

Caroline Loewen: The project became *Reconsidering Museums*, made possible by funding from the Canada Cultural Investment Fund. Work on the project officially kicked off in 2020, just as the pandemic was beginning and Canada entered a period of rapid social change, which highlighted the importance of changing the museum sector in response to not only the pandemic, but urgent calls for truth and reconciliation, the climate emergency, and growing inequality. The project turned out to be incredibly timely.

Meaghan Patterson: And it really highlighted on both sides I think the different ways that the sector does need to shift. We know that society is expecting different things of their cultural institutions whether that be museums or galleries or performing arts or visual arts or whatever the case may be. People are spending their time differently, their leisure time, what they consider to be a family outing.

And we also know people are consuming information in different kinds of ways and they are still looking for credible information or information that they can trust in places that they can go to learn new things.

I think the confluence of all these things coming together at the same time with this project, it's really an interesting kind of articulation of why the museum sector needs to shift in order to be able to respond to those changing community needs. I think we've had a moment to kind of pause and re-evaluate how we serve our publics and who we're serving and all of those things.

It's greater than the visitor numbers coming through the door and the revenue that's generated from the programs that we offer. It's greater than the collections that we hold, right? How do

we talk about that in an all-encompassing way, and I think that this project will bring people together in a way where they're working towards this larger common goal.

Caroline Loewen: The data we collected indicates that public expectations of museums are changing. The public agrees that museums are trusted institutions that excel at preservation and learning, but they want museums to do more to represent their communities and to advocate for those communities.

We spoke with Wendy Fitch, former Executive Director of the Museums Association of Saskatchewan on how those changing expectations have impacted museums.

Wendy Fitch: Their expectations, particularly in the last 10 years, especially since the TRC report was published, the expectation to see more Indigenous history in the museum, to see more about newcomers and marginalized communities in museums has really increased. The public is expecting that, and they're also beginning to expect more when it comes to other social issues. Things like the climate emergency. They want to know how changes there have been taking place. They're looking for more about LGBTQ communities in their museum experience. So, they're looking for a lot more from museums than museums ever had to address in the past.

We've always felt that museums are a place where we can trust that they're going to tell us what happened, that what they tell us is what really happened, that they aren't going to lie. They're telling us a truth. But now they want more of a truth. They want a fuller explanation of that truth.

And I think more people are understanding that there are more than one truth. That there isn't a single authoritative vision of what happened, that there can be different perspectives, and they're equally true. And I think the expectation is museums are going to provide that, those truths to people who come to visit, to their communities.

Caroline Loewen: Some of this work is already being done in museums, but many museums have indicated that they lack the resources necessary to change.

Wendy Fitch: So, I think that's part of it is they need tools on how to diversify their institution from governance on down. They also need the tools that can help them to raise awareness within the community about what museums are supposed to do. It's no longer simply training people in how to catalogue an artifact, or how to physically take care of an artifact. It's about collecting stories, and sharing those stories, and encouraging museums to let go of control and encouraging them to let those marginalized communities tell their own stories, and not try to control what those stories are.

Caroline Loewen: *Reconsidering Museums* can help fill some of those gaps for museums, it can help support museums with evidence-based messaging, recommendations, and resources. The first phase of the project was an engagement campaign called *Museums for Me*. We asked Canadians what museums mean to them. And now we have reliable information about what Canadians think the role and value of museums is.

Wendy Fitch: Well, I think the *Reconsidering Museums* project is important for a couple of reasons. I think, first, one of the things that really excited me about it was the emphasis on collecting data on finding out exactly what people do think about museums right now, what they see them as and what they want them to be. Because I think with that kind of data, you can then make the case, when you're going to your local community, or more broadly to a provincial or federal government. You have the statistics, you have the numbers that back you up that says that, yes, museums are trusted by the general public, this percentage of the public visits museums regularly, that kind of thing. I've always been somebody who believes strongly in advocacy, not in the adversarial types of advocacy, but more in how to reach people, whether it's decision makers and how to work with decision makers and go in and say, okay, you need this, we need this. How can we work together to achieve both of our needs, and I think a lot of museums don't know how to do that.

Caroline Loewen: Here's Jennifer Forsyth, Executive Director / CEO of the Alberta Museums Association, speaking about why *Reconsidering Museums* is so important.

Jennifer Forsyth: I think that we're in a really exciting time right now because after we got through two years of uncertainty, we are as a society ready to address some of the large issues that face communities. And what we really learned from *Reconsidering Museums* was that the public is ready for us to tackle those issues and address them in our museum programming and exhibitions. When we talk about the changing role of museums, along with the changes across the heritage sector, we see that the value of museums is quite broad and goes across sectors. By empowering museums to position themselves this way, we give them the tools that they need to engage deeper with their communities. I would say that *Reconsidering Museums* is a unique project. And unlike the studies of museums in the past, this one really delves into value, and it addresses the social role of museums. And that's the key piece that really sets it apart from work that was done in the past, looking at what Canadians want from museums. The other thing that I would say is that this project has had so much input from museum professionals across the country, and the caliber of work that has been pulled together will move the sector forward, it will help serve institutions across the country. And I'm really excited to see what the next few years look like as we roll out the toolkit and people start to use the pieces to talk about their work.

Caroline Loewen: In response to what we heard from the public, we've created a toolkit to support museum workers in doing the work of changing. These tools include informational

tools that expand on the data, communications tools to help museum workers share the message that museums matter and are valued by their communities, as well as advocacy tools to help museums advocate for the sector and their community. In the next three episodes, we explore the three themes that emerged out of *Reconsidering Museums*: access, authority, and activism.

Host: Thanks for listening. To learn more about *Reconsidering Museums* or to access the toolkit visit reconsideringmuseums.ca. *Reconsidering Museums* is a national project undertaken in partnership with a consortium of provincial and territorial museums associations and the Canadian Museums Association, led by the Alberta Museums Association. We gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Cultural Investment Fund. Music from this episode is Inspirational Piano and Orchestra by Raphael Crux.