

Why Museums Matter Episode 3: Authority

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 Three: Authority

Chloe Dennis: Hi, I'm Chloe Dennis, Project Coordinator for *Reconsidering Museums*. As part of *Reconsidering Museums*, a national research and advocacy project, we conducted a public engagement campaign where we heard from Canadians across the country. Out of that engagement, three themes emerged. The first theme was access. The second theme, and the one we're exploring on this episode, is authority. Canadians consider museums a credible source of information. They have authority as institutions that excel at preservation, learning, and storytelling. But we also heard that museums have work to do to better represent all Canadians, and that many Canadians do not feel as though museums reflect their interests or culture.

We have Dr. Victoria Dickenson, independent scholar and former museum director with over 40 years' experience at senior levels and museums and cultural administration, here to talk about trust and authority. Victoria has explored the changing views of Canadians by comparing research done in 1973 with the data collected by *Reconsidering Museums*.

Victoria Dickenson: Museums have been trusted for some time. During our work on the *Reconsidering Museums* project, we looked at the 1973 survey of Canadian museums that was conducted in the light of a national museum policy from 1972. So, this is over 50 years ago, and people said they trusted museums, well, what do they trust them for? So that's the important question to ask. People say they trust museums but trust them to do what. And so, we probed a bit into this in our more recent survey with *Reconsidering Museums* to find out what are museums trusted for. They are trusted to tell a narrative that is based on the objects that they have and the research that they do. They're also, interestingly enough, trusted to keep people safe in a sense, and that's something we can unpack a little bit. The notion of safety, they are a place you can take your children to, they are place you can go where you feel comfortable, or



you should feel comfortable and feel welcome. Trust has a number of components, part of the trust being based on the work of the museum itself, and its collection, research in the collections and the research that's done around them. And trust that the institution itself is public and open and welcoming. That's the ideal. I'm not saying that always happens. But in the public perception from surveys, that sense of 'we can trust this institution' is something that does come to the fore.

Chloe Dennis: Canadians continue to trust museums, but the terms of that trust are changing. Visitors want to see stories that are relevant to them, and their communities told in museums. They want to be represented but also included in the process of storytelling.

Victoria Dickenson: So, while people say they trust museums, there has been some shift in the sense of what does that mean? Do you trust museums to tell a narrative to give you have a narrative which reflects your experience, or what you know of your own past. Over 40% in our more recent survey found that museums weren't reflecting their experience or reflecting their histories. Canada has become, since 1973, a much more diverse country, particularly in the urban centres. It's understandable that for people not seeing their own past or their own histories in the museum, that's really something museums have to look at. People want to trust the museum to give them the right information for the times in which they live. And as we think about these increasingly perilous times of global pandemics and global climatic changes, people are looking to that trustworthiness of museums to help them navigate, what are they going to do. So, I think that trust is something that has changed, it's not just a blind trust in museums.

Chloe Dennis: Trust is not static. Museums need to work to maintain the trust of their communities by showing they're worthy of that trust.

Victoria Dickenson: Institutions can lose the trust of the public. I think museums have a real responsibility to understand the basis for trust and to really work with their communities to dig a bit deeper into what makes them trusted. I want to go back to those two parts to trust. One part is museums are trusted for the information they have because it's based on research, it's based on collections, and that's really important. Museums have got to really understand that having expertise in their subject fields is really an important thing. Coming back to that notion of the trust in the venue, museums have got to be welcoming and be safe spaces. There's a lot been a lot of talk during the pandemic about safe spaces, but to be safe means to feel that you are comfortable in that space, you're welcome. You can learn in that space and the space is open to you. So, there are a lot of dimensions to that. Our populations have changed over time, and we want to keep people coming to the museum, we have to understand how do people categorize the knowledge that's important for them to get at the museum and how do they think about the space itself as a safe and comfortable space to be in?

Chloe Dennis: Stephen Yellow Old Woman, General Manager at Blackfoot Crossing at Siksika, is here to talk about who has authority in museums, the realities of how museums function, and the importance of governance and creating structures to share authority.

Stephen Yellow Old Woman: Ultimately, I am of the perception now that it's the entities that control the resources that have the most authority for and in the museum. So, on our side, we may put in policies, procedures, corporate bylaws, but at the end of the day, we're placed in a really fine line of a balancing act. And the real key is how our organizations maintain that governance perspective, so that we're not meddling too far into each other's - I've heard it say we're meddling in the weeds before - it's maintaining and keeping that distinct separation. And now when we look at the different aspects of the funding, whether it comes for federal, provincial, or municipalities, they have a large contribution and vested interest in what we are doing, but they are voted in. So ultimately, indirectly, it's the voice of the people, it's the people that are putting in these politicians. And it's up to us as voters to ensure we are putting in the right people into office that will maintain and keep these cultural centres, museums, these historic places open and thriving, and ensuring that we're keeping our distinct voices and our narratives are all included in here and our contribution to society, to the makeup of Canada and North America.

Chloe Dennis: Authority doesn't just refer to issues of governance and operations. Museums are working to break down those hierarchical authority structures by working to be accountable to their communities in terms of the objects and cultural belongings that they preserve and the stories that they tell. We know that objects don't simply speak for themselves, they must be cared for and interpreted. Who has the authority to tell stories in a museum?

Stephen Yellow Old Woman: First off on that, not everybody can touch everything that's down there. When we break it down, there are some culturally significant items that you need to be authorized to touch. Without you having that authority, for us, we've been raised that if you do things and you don't have that authority, bad things are going to happen to you. If you claim to have that authority and you do things, it's going to come back and it's going to not be good for you.

For example, holy bundles. There was a time where our holy bundles were being moved off of our land for protection. The government at the time was not so conducive, so to speak, they were decimating our culture, destroying it. And so many of the bundles went out. A lot of our Elders understood that giving them to others that are not Blackfoot, which are not respected by the government, but giving them to outsiders that are of the culture of the political bodies and have a reverence for us in our culture, they preserved those for us at a time when those things were being ultimately destroyed. Now they're at the point where they're starting to come back. As I grew up in the 70s and 80s, I was already hearing stories of people that were selling their bundles to outsiders of the community. And when the outsiders were buying them, they did not

understand there are protocols, there are things to do with them, and they would just open them and do things that would be considered disrespectful.

So, you have to have that reverence, that authority, for those items, but also, it's going to come down for us at Blackfoot Crossing to how we maintain our integrity. Do we have the integrity for the community to trust us with those items? If there's a holy bundle brought back for a family, will that family trust that we're going to do the right things with that bundle, and whatever that may mean to the holders of that? It comes down to the need to maintain that integrity and ensuring that our community trusts us with bringing in these items and preserving and protecting. Our mandate here at Blackfoot Crossing is to preserve, protect, and promote Blackfoot culture. Everything we do here comes down to, first off, preserving any artifacts that come into the museum here. Ultimately, we are preserving our culture through maintaining and ensuring that these are here for hundreds of years down the road. Blackfoot Crossing is a multifaceted component museum where yeah, you have the history, but ultimately, it's our culture that we're sharing and the history of our people here. We're walking a really fine line and I appreciate that as well because it's keeping me accountable to my neighbours at home. I live in my community, so it's really connected. I need to be able to go to the grocery store and look people in the eye and tell them and have them know that I did them and their families right. So, it's a really unique kind of situation compared to other museums.

Chloe Dennis: The basis for authority is trust. If you don't have the trust of your community, you have no authority. Museums are starting to understand that sharing authority with their communities is essential. In our research, we heard that the public wants to be involved in developing exhibits and programs. They want museums to collaborate with their communities to increase the relevance of their work.

Host: Thanks for listening. In response to the need for museums to rethink the way they approach authority, we've created communications and advocacy resources as part of the *Reconsidering Museums* toolkit. These resources include Language Recommendations and public campaigns to change the way the work of museums is positioned.

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.