

Why Museums Matter Episode 4: Activism

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 Four: Activism

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 two themes were access and authority. The third theme, and the one we are exploring on this episode is activism. This is particularly important for the future of museums. We heard from Canadians that they want museums to be accountable to their communities, and that they want museums to be credible advocates for causes that they care about through education, representation, and advocacy.

Shauna Allen talks about what activism in the context of museums might look like. Shauna is an established museum practitioner that has worked at museums in both Alberta and Nova Scotia. She is currently a PhD candidate at University College Cork in Ireland. Her research is *A Trans-Atlantic Study of Activism in Museums*. It is an exploration of the ways museums use their collections, exhibitions, and programs to respond to contemporary issues and inspire social change.

Shauna Allen: Some of the definitions I've found compelling, as I've been doing my research include from Richard Sandell and Robert Janes' 2009 publication *Museum Activism*. In that they define it as marshalling and directing unique resources with explicit intent to act upon inequalities, injustices, and environmental crisis. Another definition that I have come across is the 2013 publication *Museums and Social Activism* by Kylie Message. She defines curatorial activism as attempts to engage with, represent, and contribute to social and political protest and reform movements. So drawing from these and other definitions, I've come to define museum activism for the purposes of my research as the expression of museum's socially conscious and driven commitment to social justice. Using their collections, exhibitions, and

programs, a museum engaging in activism will harness their power and potential to inspire, implement, and activate social change. They take action against discrimination and racism, human rights abuses, and environmental crisis. They take an emphatic stand on the issues of the day.

Chloe Dennis: Our research showed that Canadians want museums to do this, to take a stand. But not all museums have risen to this challenge. Many museum professionals are resistant to the idea of activism in museums.

Shauna Allen: So I think one of the main barriers is a persistent belief in the myth that museums should be neutral, when the truth of it is that they've never been neutral. They've long favored one perspective or position over another. Favouring narratives of the dominant culture has resulted in omissions of minority and marginalized groups. Favouring heteronormative narratives has resulted in the emission of queer histories. The omission of these diverse histories, women's histories, black and Indigenous perspectives is a problem that museums are now having to reconcile. And it's a definite result of the fact that museums have never been neutral. They are seeing museums as institutions that continue to maintain the status quo rather than contributors to making change. And I think this brings me right back to the need for museums to embrace museum activism and truly become places of critical dialogue and change-making that inform how we live our lives and form society and thus, in turn, benefit our communities in a variety of ways.

I think another barrier is a fear of the negative repercussions from potential opposition from government, board members, previously established audiences, and community members. But I don't think this potential opposition is as big a threat as museums think it is, particularly if they can demonstrate sound reasoning for the positions they are taking. They can do this by tying their museum activism to their mission and mandate, to their vision statements. By drawing on existing and accepted activating frameworks like the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, or even something like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's 94 Calls to Action.

Chloe Dennis: we know that there is growing pressure for museums to actively advocate for social change, to work to make their communities better. But the benefit isn't just for the community, this work can be transformative for the museum itself.

Shauna Allen: I think one of the main benefits of museum activism is the museum's continued relevance in our contemporary world, when every bit of knowledge that we may want is available via a quick internet search on a device that we keep close at hand all day long, museums have to be more than just places for learning and gathering information.

Chloe Dennis: Museum activism is not new. We know people have been advocating for change in and outside of museums for decades. Here's Heather George, curator, public historian, and President of the Canadian Museums Associations Board of Directors, speaking about what is needed to join those efforts.

Heather George: For museum folks who are trying to get involved in this work, and even for folks outside of our sector in other areas of heritage and culture or even just the general public who are coming into our spaces, I think it's really important for people to first be humble. I think the days of being the expert on Indigenous people, it's over. I would never say that I'm an expert, right? I'm always learning, there's always more to know, and to learn and to bring together around my own cultural knowledge and historical knowledge. So sort of the last question about how museum workers can support those who have been doing this work, I think it's really important to make sure that the projects that we want to do in our spaces, and the stories that we want to highlight are really based in what the community needs and wants. And that will be different for every community, so you really have to work with local community and local community first. I also really hope that museum workers can become advocates for the resources that they need to do this work. So you know, talk to your MPs and MPPs and your municipal politicians, talk to your granting bodies and say, we really want to do this work and we don't have the resources for it, so we need this to be something that is prioritized by funders, both government and non-government.

Chloe Dennis: Having the resources to do this work is key because the change that is required isn't just in one area. Activism in museums means looking at external community needs, but also changing the way that museums work - their governance, operations, and programming.

Heather George: The reality is that museums are this fluid, dynamic space, that isn't one thing, right? Like, yes, you can say the museum is a building. Well, every building is a building. You know, the museum is a collection, the museum is the Board of Governors, it's the policies, it's the managers, it's the frontline staff, it's the volunteers. It's all of those things and the people that come into our spaces. So, one of the challenges for us in doing this work with Indigenous communities and thinking about the change in our sector is that it's in all areas. But it just seems like sometimes museums don't always replicate the best of society, sometimes we replicate the worst. We're slow to change and we're afraid of change, I think. And though that fear, and that slowness, is sometimes a barrier to building good relationships with Indigenous communities because everybody can see through that. So, we almost have to, as a sector, encourage the education, not just of the people working in it, but all of the people around it. We need our funders to also better understand Indigenous matters and colonial issues, and we need our boards to better understand this as well. We have to be okay with the fear and we have to be okay with change. And, you know, really not doing it for ourselves, but doing it for the communities which we have directly benefited from their loss, right, like financially, we have very directly financially benefited from the loss of material culture from Indigenous

communities, and you can't deny that. We've got some work to do. But I think that there are a lot of good people that want to do it. I wouldn't say that we're there, not by a longshot. But I think there are more people now who are ready to have these conversations and that's pretty exciting.

Host: Thanks for listening, in response to the need for museums to rethink the way they approach activism, we've created communications and advocacy resources as part of the *Reconsidering Museums* toolkit. These resources include an Advocacy Policy Template and Action Guide to support your museum in taking the step into activism.

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.