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The Strategic Making of a National Collection: Rethinking the Canada Council Art Bank's Institutional History

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La Banque d'œuvres d'art du Conseil des arts du Canada collectionne et diffuse l'art contemporain canadien depuis plus de cinquante ans. Le modèle particulier de cette institution et son impact au pays et à l'étranger restent cependant peu étudiés. Une succession complexe de décisions historiques et de dynamiques de pouvoir a conduit aux activités que mène aujourd'hui la Banque d'œuvres d'art. Cet article met en lumière et réexamine certaines des étapes cruciales et des décisions singulières qui caractérisent le modèle de la Banque et sa collection, et ce, en s'appuyant sur des personnalités clés et sur leurs approches stratégiques. En revenant sur les histoires institutionnelles et en les racontant à nouveau, il est possible de faire évoluer et de renforcer nos perspectives, et ainsi, de nous donner les moyens de nous confronter, aujourd'hui, aux décisions du passé.

Since 1972, the Canada Council Art Bank (the Art Bank) has collected, rented, loaned, and exhibited contemporary Canadian art. It is widely promoted as the world's largest collection of contemporary Canadian fine art, holding more than 17,000 artworks by over 3,000 artists.[1] At any given time, thousands of the Art Bank's artworks are on display in public and private spaces worldwide. By revisiting core milestones in the Art Bank's history, this article suggests how institutions such as the Art Bank play a foundational role in the development of community values such as mentorship, reciprocity, and resourceful reinvestments in the realm of Canadian visual arts. This article attempts to outline these values by drawing on interviews, archival research, and data.

The Art Bank's focus on display, encounters, and interactions differentiates it from other institutions. "Permanent" collections such as those of the National Gallery of Canada (NGC) and the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) prioritize security, preservation, and education. In contrast, according to Melinda Mollineaux, who worked for the Canada Council for the Arts (Canada Council) for twenty-five years in roles spanning Program Officer, Equity Coordinator, and Policy and Planning Officer,[2] the Art Bank's "working" or "revolving" collection prioritizes experiences with art, though circulation and public engagement, rather than safeguarding artworks as objects of value. Rebecca Huxtable, Manager of the Art Rental Program at the Art Bank, observes that there is trepidation around the label of "working" collection, as it connotes a lower hierarchical value than "permanent" collection.[3] The collection today is shaped by teams of peer reviewers, as compared to "permanent" collections such as the NGC and the AGO, which are shaped by curatorial staff. Christopher McKay, the in-house conservator at the Art Bank, notes that conservation work is preventative or responsive, allowing for the increased circulation of artworks.[4] Through a focus on enabling display, encounters, and interactions, the Art Bank uniquely facilitates "spontaneous, unexpected or unspecific engagement"[5] with art.

To understand how, when, and why the Art Bank adopted these unique approaches, a careful examination of the Art Bank's past and present practices is necessary. By examining intersectional moments (such as collaborations between governmental art units), power dynamics (including the susceptibility of the Art Bank to federal funding over time), and broader societal influences (which led to the introduction of the Art Bank's "non-revenue generating" programs), this article provides new perspectives on what can be considered four milestone phases in the Art Bank's history. Existing academic literature on the Art Bank, including two Master's theses, was published primarily between 1972 and 1999—a time of lively public engagement[6]—and provides insights into the perceived successes and shortcomings of Art Bank's early activities.[7] Marianne Heggtveit—who worked at the Art Bank as an Art Consultant, then Manager of the Purchase Program until 1995, followed by various roles at the Canada Council—wrote "The Canada Council Art Bank: National Treasure, Support to Artists or Decorating Service for Governments" in 1992.[8] Jan Allen, who later became Director of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, wrote "The Anatomy of Excellence: the Canada

Council Art Bank Collection, 1972–1983" in 1993.[9] In 2007, the Art Bank published *Art at Work: The Canada Council Art Bank* in celebration of their thirty-fifth anniversary. *Art at Work* presents the Art Bank's history from the institution's own perspective and provides context around major operational restructuring in the early 2000s.

While the Art Bank is considered a point of pride for the Canada Council today, transitions and developments influencing this identity have not been adequately documented and discussed. This lack results from factors including, but not limited to: the Art Bank's closure and restructuring between 1995 and 1999; limited staffing and financial resources to maintain archival practices; reduced public access to the collection and its resource center following 1995; and prioritizing collection circulation over curation, education, and research.[10] Changes that have affected the past and present position of the institution have thus remained broadly unaddressed.

FORMATION: 1971–78

The Art Bank was founded in a climate of strong cultural nationalism, following the Massey-Lévesque Report of 1951[11] and the establishment of the Canada Council in 1957.[12] At the time, there was caution around governmental control and influence over the arts, so the Canada Council was set up to operate at "arm's length" from the government. In 1969, Secretary of State Gerard Pelletier had introduced a new federal cultural policy with the trademark objectives of democratization and decentralization, building on the Massey-Lévesque Report's aims to increase accessibility to arts and culture across Canada.[13]

In October 1971, Suzanne Rivard LeMoyne[14] sent a letter proposing the formation of the Art Bank to Gérard Pelletier, then Secretary of State.[15] The proposal strategically situated the Art Bank within the values of democratization and decentralization. A revised proposal was approved in 1972, and the formation of the Art Bank was publicly announced.[16] The original mandate was structured around three somewhat disparate goals: aesthetic improvement of federal buildings, support of Canadian artists, and creation of a market for contemporary art in Canada (the "Art Bank effect").[17]

The early years of the Art Bank under the founding leadership of Luke Rombout (director from 1972–74 and, later, from 1996–98), have been described as "a five-year push to give money to artists" with no long-term plans in place.[18] The rental program was slow to start, and costs were higher than anticipated,[19] despite Rombout's innovative administrative and warehouse solutions (figs. 1–2).[20] The Art Bank also commonly used an "in-depth" purchasing strategy to build its collection, wherein Rombout identified a group of artists to purchase multiple pieces from.[21] Furthermore, the government effectively controlled the Art Bank. Starting in 1972–73, the Secretary of State provided one million dollars a year for five years for the creation of the Art Bank.[22] The Art Bank was vulnerable, however, because it was financially dependent on this appropriation and its status with the Treasury Board, which required government departments to rent art exclusively from the Art Bank. The integrity of the Canada Council and the Art Bank was challenged in September 1978, when the Treasury Board announced that the Art Bank would only receive $200,000 for administration of the institution ($800,000 for acquisitions was withheld).[23] This decision was heavily criticized as a politically motivated breach of the arm's-length principle.[24] The Canada Council reacted by reallocating $300,000 to the Art Bank for acquisitions.[25] This had lasting repercussions as the Council became (and remains, in 2026) responsible for most of the Art Bank's funding.[26]

Despite being marked by financial and administrative hurdles in their early years, various rewarding and mutually beneficial dynamics were established between the Art Bank and other governmental collections. These relationships, as discussed below, emerged through the communal exchange or redistribution

fig. 1 (top) Registrar's office at 2279 Gladwin Crescent in Ottawa, Ontario. The Art Bank's early card-based data system, undated (ca. 1975). Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank. Photo: Brian Merrett.

fig. 2 (bottom) Warehouse at 2279 Gladwin Crescent in Ottawa, Ontario. An early tour with rental clients and consultants, undated (ca. 1975). Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank. Photo: Brian Merrett.

of information and resources.[27] This contributed to the formation of an art market in Canada, sometimes referred to as the "Art Bank effect."[28] The value of these relationships has been overlooked and undervalued, leaving their histories buried within the margins of archival materials.

Strategically reciprocal relationships between federal governmental arts agencies predate the Art Bank's origins. Rivard LeMoyne's concept and proposal likely arose out of her experience on the Fine Arts Advisory Committee for Public Works since 1970[29] and may have been directly prompted by a request from Al Johnson (then Secretary of the Treasury Board) to borrow art from the Canada Council's small collection for his offices.[30] Kelvin Stanley, who was Chief Architect of Public Works, travelled to Sweden in 1971 while researching global art programmes, where he visited an institutional art inventory for distribution across the country, a concept similar to the Art Bank.[31] Furthermore, one of Rivard LeMoyne's intended pathways to the development of an art market was the Art Bank's role as a literal bank,[32] wherein artworks could be deposited and later withdrawn (repurchased) and resold by the artist when the work had earned interest (increased in value due to distribution by the Art Bank).

Prior to the Art Bank, some governmental departments had budgets for the purchase and display of art. Rivard LeMoyne's 1971 proposal letter suggested to "consolidate all federal purchases of art."[33] Consolidations were suggested again in 1986[34] and 1996,[35] which is indicative of the deep entanglements between governmental collections. When the Art Bank's acquisition budget was eliminated in 1978, this coincided with the dissolution of the Public Works collection, making the Art Bank the primary source of art for federal buildings.[36] The Public Works Collection had been struggling since the early 1970s. The closure in 1978 was due to temporal circumstances, negative public receptions, and perceived centralism and dichotomies between the headquarters and regional interests.[37] According to Martha Young (who has worked at the Art Bank since 1998 in administrative, marketing, and operations roles), the Art Bank advised on and accepted donations from the dissolving Public Works collection.[38] The collection of Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) received an acquisition budget for the Indigenous Art Collection[39] in the same year that the Art Bank was founded (1972),[40] and the Art Bank regularly borrows works from CIRNAC for exhibitions. Finally, the collection of Global Affairs Canada (GAC), which started from public donations in the 1930s,[41] grew when additional works were purchased from the original small collection owned by the Canada Council in 1970.[42] As early as 1973, the Art Bank and the GAC collaborated on international exhibitions.[43] Between 1972 and 1995, the Art Bank and GAC also "borrowed" staff from each other for special projects.[44] Not only have these collections supported each other through mutually beneficial collaborations over time, but the individual efforts of each collection merge into the contribution of the federal government to the "Art Bank effect" within Canada and beyond.

NON-REVENUE GENERATING PROGRAMS: 1975–95

Despite early financial and administrative hurdles, and under rising expectations and reduced funding following the departure of Rombout,[45] Christopher Youngs (Director from 1976–80)[46] introduced the Art Bank's so-called "non-revenue generating" programs[47] at the end of the 1970s. These programs were costly and did not directly generate a return on investment. Nevertheless, they would become core to the identity of the Art Bank.

Jessica Bradley can be credited for driving the Art Bank's activities beyond rental and toward new audiences.[48] Bradley was one of the Art Bank's first employees, starting as a Liaison Officer in 1974, and finishing her tenure as Special Projects Officer in 1979.[49] Within this time, her projects included an exhibition of works from the Art Bank at the Dalhousie Art Gallery and the installation of a sculpture park at the National Arts Centre, which Bradley crossed

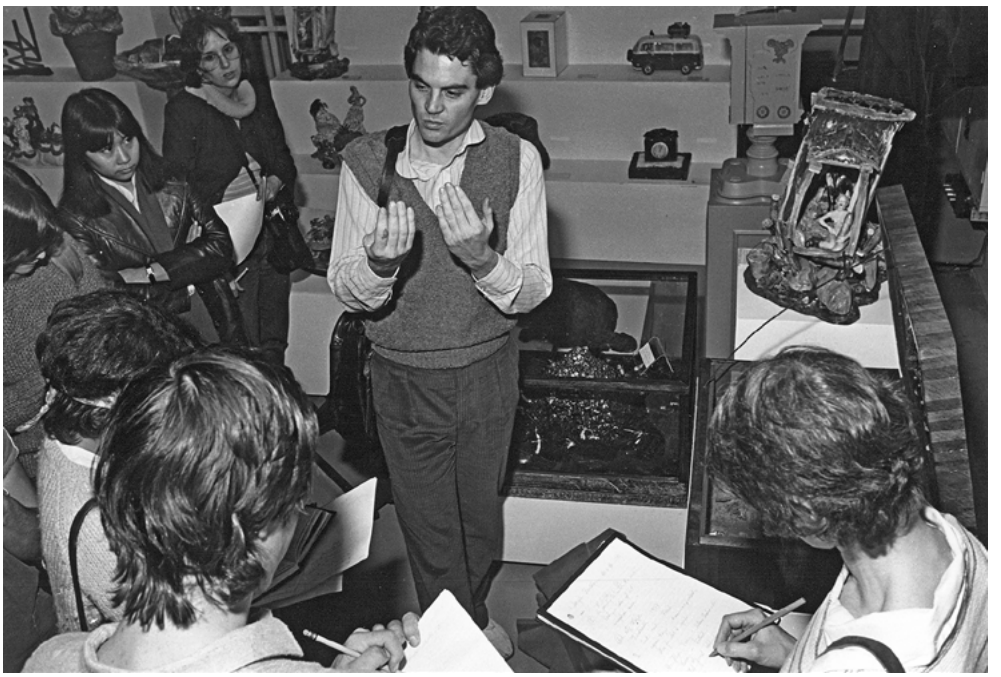

fig. 3 2279 Gladwin Crescent in Ottawa, Ontario. University of Ottawa students visiting with their professor Trevor Gould (speaking at the center), undated (ca. 1975). Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank. Photo: David Barbour.

through daily on her way to work at the Art Bank. In large part due to Bradley's encouragement and ideas, in 1977, the Art Bank's mandate was updated to include an expanded client base beyond government clients, and three new programs: extended loans, the Special Purchase Assistance Program (SPAP), and the Repurchase Program.[50] Extended loans allow works from the collection to be placed in institutions for a year or longer.[51] The SPAP, active until 1993,[52] provided matching grants to finance acquisitions of art by institutions across Canada. This was a necessary form of assistance that the Canada Council did not otherwise provide.[53] The Repurchase Program allowed artists to buy back their works for the original sale price, plus an administrative fee.[54] Revenue from repurchases was used to purchase more recent work by the same artist, or work by artists new to the collection.[55] By allowing works to leave the collection, space was made for the care of the current collection and continued support of more contemporary work by living artists. The Art Bank's stimulation of the art market in Canada enabled the existence of their Repurchase Program, because artists gained the financial means to purchase back their work and resell it for profit.

William (Bill) Kirby was Director of the Art Bank from 1981 to 1995. Kirby studied at the University of British Columbia and worked at galleries in Edmonton and Winnipeg throughout his early career, then became Visual Arts Officer at the Canada Council (1978–81).[56] Following his tenure at the Art Bank, Kirby founded the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art (CCCA) database.[57] Kirby shared and built on an existing enthusiasm for public programming and outreach.[58] He focused less on the creation of a cohesively curated collection, and justified the Art Bank's non-revenue generating activities as a proactive, indirect way of generating revenue.[59] Kirby's attitude extended to the physical space in Ottawa: the Art Bank had an "open door" policy, and regularly welcomed school tours and art enthusiasts (fig. 3).[60] The first building on Gladwin Crescent opened a public gallery space in 1981.[61] In 1989, when the Art Bank moved to 370 Catherine Street, the building and location were chosen with the public in mind: visitor access was improved, there was a large exhibition room, and the space allowed for better collection interaction, care, and maintenance (figs. 4–6).[62] A tours program led

fig. 4 Exterior of 371 Catherine Street in Ottawa, Ontario, undated. Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank.

fig. 5 Lower gallery at 371 Catherine Street in Ottawa, Ontario. Twentieth anniversary party, June 17, 1992. Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank. Photo: Justin Wonnacott.

fig. 6 (top) Entrance and "catwalk" space at 371 Catherine Street in Ottawa, Ontario, undated (ca. late 1990s). Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank.

fig. 7 (bottom) Resource Center (behind cubicles) at 371 Catherine Street in Ottawa, Ontario, undated (ca. late 1990s). Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank.

by Heggtveit ran from 1981 to 1990, and there was an active resource center (fig. 7).[63] The Art Bank was a popular destination, and it was treated as a gallery rather than a storage warehouse.[64]

The collection also grew significantly during this phase as the institution continued to receive funds from the government (albeit reduced and sporadic) for the purchase of new work. In line with the approach of the Canada Council, purchase decisions were informed solely by the criteria of "artistic excellence."[65] Neither rentability (suitability to office spaces) nor "quotas for success rate, gender, region, or standing of the artist; medium, style or selling price of the work; or size" were considered.[66] All art was collected under the same umbrella of "contemporary Canadian art," rather than distinguishing between categories like "Inuit" and "Canadian," as other collections did.[67]

The use of peer assessment committees (called juries at the time) to inform acquisitions of new artworks was costly. Members of the voting committees were selected by Art Bank staff and were paid to travel to artist's studios or their representing galleries across Canada to recommend works for purchase. Both Rombout and Youngs acted as voting chairs of the committees, which were seen by many artists as a "self-serving clique with insufficient distance between those who adjudicated purchases and those whose work was purchased."[68] Significant changes to this process were quickly introduced under Kirby's leadership in the early 1980s. He chaired the committees but did not vote,[69] members never served twice on the same committee,[70] and fifty percent of the members were new each year,[71] ensuring a variety of interactions and perspectives. Committees travelled to Cape Dorset, Pangnirtung, Baker Lake, and Churchill to meet with artists and speak about their work in person,[72] though members of the committees were likely not from Indigenous, Inuit, or Métis communities.[73] Gender representation was also a contentious topic. Council gradually required that each five-person jury include at least two women, one person of Indigenous background, one person of a "culturally diverse" background, and one person to represent a region external to the artist whose work was being considered.[74]

The Art Bank's "non-revenue generating" programs strained financial resources, as did the new structure of the peer-assessment committees. While these changes are often recognized as part of the Art Bank's decline, starting in the late 1980s, they allowed the Art Bank to establish itself within and contribute to the growth of a significant network encompassing many actors (including the government, artists, galleries, dealers, etc.). Financially problematic programs can be reframed as facilitators of mutually beneficial networks of artistic and professional development. These programs allowed the Art Bank to be open, adaptable, and flexible enough to expand the activities and presence of the collection and distribute various resources into the ecosystem of Canadian art. Uniquely, the programs allowed the collection to be viewed in both informal and formal (traditional gallery) settings.[75] An open-door policy turned the Art Bank into a space that brought people together. Travelling peer assessment committees built countless lasting relationships: participants established new connections, found out what others were doing, and had new conversations about their work.[76] Because of this, the support from peers was the real highlight of the purchase program for many artists.[77] The earlier Print Studio Program, which lasted until 1979, had a similar objective to "support the presses and foster exchange of ideas and expertise among regions, while providing the Art Bank with fifty prints."[78] Furthermore, travelling exhibitions, while expensive, stimulated the growth of community networks when local consultants and technicians were hired to assist visiting Art Bank staff.[79] Framing and conservation work was also outsourced, disseminating the care of the collection into a productive and reliable network of contributors who benefitted from financial support and career credit.[80]

The Art Bank drew strategically on non-financial resources, including community relationships, institutional partnerships, and enthusiastic volunteers

from within their growing and active network, to sustain itself in times of financial and administrative hardship. Unfortunately, this network was not enough to keep the Art Bank off the chopping block in the face of heavy governmental pressures and cuts leading up to 1995.[81] As discussed in the following section, the Art Bank's substantial presence and influence across the Canadian arts scene is ultimately what kept it afloat throughout a period of uncertainty and challenging changes.

COST-RECOVERY PHASE: 1995–2015

From the late 1980s to mid-1990s, the Art Bank faced increasing pressures and accountabilities within their growing network. There was optimism within the Canada Council following the election of a Liberal government in 1993, on the heels of a five-year funding freeze.[82] Roch Carrier became Director and Donna Scott became Chair of the Canada Council in 1994, and were ordered by the Treasury Board to cut the administrative budget by $2.4 million within three years.[83] The Canada Council viewed the Art Bank, which was running an annual deficit of around $2 million, as an easily disposable financial burden, especially after Gallagher and Associates (a financial management firm) was commissioned to examine the Art Bank in 1994.[84]

This led to the introduction of a new strategic plan in 1994, which involved the unexpected elimination of the Art Bank altogether.[85] Throughout this time, the Canada Council had pushed the Art Bank to focus exclusively on revenue,[86] there were notable complaints of inequitable acquisition practices,[87] and employees were stretched very thin across responsibilities to various programs and large intakes of new art.[88]

In 1995, the Canada Council formed the Art Bank Transition Advisory Committee (ABTAC).[89] The ABTAC was mandated to "advise the Canada Council board on how to achieve the phasing out of its involvement in and administration of the Art Bank and most particularly on the future of its artworks, information resources and other assets."[90] In 1996, Rombout was rehired as a special advisor with the mandate to "dismantle the Art Bank."[91] Instead, Rombout and the ABTAC recommended that the institution enter cost recovery and sustain itself by focusing on the rental program and deaccessioning a significant portion of its collection.[92] During this time, Rombout cancelled the Repurchase Program, opened the Art Bank to the private sector, secured a high-profile contract with the Vancouver Public Library, and secured funding to sustain collection care through the Millennium Arts Fund.[93] The Millennium Fund, an initiative of the Canada Council, was formed to support cultural enrichment and activity at the turn of the millennium.[94]

The ABTAC's recommended restructuring of the collection officially began with the leadership of Victoria Henry (1999–2015), who had a unique career track including eight years of work with communities in India and Zambia, which led to her opening the Ufundi Gallery in Ottawa (1976–92).[95] Henry was instructed to manage the Art Bank "with a break-even budget, increase revenues, and significantly expand the number of corporate clients."[96] Numerous changes were implemented to meet the ABTAC's 1995 recommendations,[97] including a relocation a less expensive space (921 St. Laurent Boulevard), a focus on business, a new client base and strategic promotional activities, and major adjustments to the contents of the collection.

A new focus on business is clear on many fronts in activities of the early 2000s. An aggressive marketing strategy was introduced, employees were organized into teams with a client base and territory, and financial reporting, appraisals, and conservation practices were streamlined.[98] Focus shifted from engagement and active networking to business operations (e.g., meeting rental targets), as evidenced by a 2008 survey to rental clients, which found that they desired more information on rented artworks and their artists.[99] All of this was

in the service of the Art Bank's new status as a cost-recovery institution that needed to cover its own expenses through revenue generated from rentals.

The Art Bank was also, for the first time, in the unique position of competing for clients within the art market they had helped to develop. It was necessary to open the rental program to the private sector, as many government clients were lost when the Treasury Board rescinded the Art Bank's exclusive access to these clients following the "cut" in 1995.[100] The Art Bank became exceptionally vulnerable to political and economic shifts. Henry observes that the Art Bank and the economy are closely aligned: in the early 2000s, the economy was thriving, which allowed the Art Bank to flourish until the effects of the 2008 economic recession were felt around 2010.[101] Between 2006 and 2015, under Stephen Harper's Conservative government, very few funds were directed towards arts and culture, and of the remaining existing rental contracts with the federal government, many were cancelled.[102] In response, the Art Bank undertook strategic activities to justify their existence to the federal government.[103] In response, the scope of activities was altered to cater to a new client base, one that allowed for the circulating of works beyond government spheres. Within Ottawa, the community (and a new client base) was extended through a series of Open House events in the early 2000s (fig. 8). Strategic partnerships were created, allowing for the display of art in prominent public spaces (e.g., the National Capital Commission Banners, the National Arts Centre Scenes, and the ByWard Market Courtyards)[104] in the absence of a dedicated Art Bank exhibition space. In 2014, the need for partnerships decreased with the opening of Âjagemô (Algonquin for "crossroads"), a high-traffic public exhibition space on the ground level of the Canada Council's offices at 150 Elgin Street in Ottawa (fig. 9).[105] Âjagemô, which is physically located in Ottawa and logistically tied to the Canada Council,[106] is typically curated through open calls for projects drawing from the Art Bank's collection.

fig. 8 Sculpture area in warehouse of 921 St. Laurent Boulevard in Ottawa, Ontario. Mardi Gras–themed thirtieth anniversary celebration, February 12, 2002. Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank.

fig. 9 Âjagemô exhibition space at 150 Elgin Street, Ottawa. Installation shot of *Coming into Sight*, undated (ca. June 20, 2023 to May 20, 2024). Courtesy of the Canada Council Art Bank. Photo: Brandon Clarida Image Services.

Major adjustments to the contents of the collection followed the ABTAC's recommendation to downsize the collection to reduce storage costs. The goal was to develop a smaller collection of new art that could be circulated more frequently.[107] In April 1996, Rombout suspended the renowned Repurchase Program,[108] which artists had heavily criticized for primarily benefitting those who *could* repurchase their work and were therefore "least in need of assistance."[109] Repurchased works were, at times, resold by the artist into less accessible private circles, which worked against the Art Bank's desire to bring art into public spaces. A final, six-month repurchase window was offered, which closed on March 31, 2001,[110] leading to the deaccessioning of around three thousand works "including multiples, the film and video collection...and installation works that, because of their size, could not be rented."[111] Subject matter (political content, violence, sex, nudity, religion) also influenced deaccessions.[112] Artists were informed of and involved in the process,[113] and deaccessioned works were donated to public collections, museums, galleries, and school resource centers.[114] Art deaccessioned following the final repurchase window is divested with public access and engagement in mind.

For new acquisitions, equity-deserving groups such as "culturally diverse," Indigenous, and female artists were targeted to address gaps in the collection. From the start, Henry insisted that the collection better reflect the work of Indigenous, Métis, and Inuit artists.[115] This was partially a move to cater to new interest from clients in works by artists from diverse demographic backgrounds. The effectiveness of this approach is reflected in the fact that works purchased through discretionary or targeted calls are highly circulated: frequently selected by curators, and in high demand from clients. New art was also required to be suitable for display in an office environment. Purchasing with rentals in mind appears to have been beneficial: by 2007, 75 percent of art acquired since 2000 has been rented (compared to 35 percent for art acquired between 1972 and 1995).[116] In January 2008, discretionary purchases that do not involve peer assessment were introduced.[117] These purchases, made in consultation with colleagues at the Canada Council, are considered small-scale actions to correct disparities in the collection.[118] Prior to 2008, Henry also frequently purchased art using the Director's Discretionary Budget.[119] Open calls for acquisitions under peer review were also introduced, contradicting the earlier exclusive and

pre-determined shortlisting based on "artistic excellence" as the sole grounds of consideration for acquisition.

Excellence as the sole acquisition criterion was always a questionable approach, as significant representational gaps exist in the collection that suggest art by artists belonging to underrepresented demographic groups was not considered "excellent." According to Jan Allen, excellence can be used to hide assumptions and authority.[120] The concept of excellence is difficult to measure or otherwise justify, as it exists "in the eye of the beholder."[121] Controversy arose around an Art Bank exhibition (*DIASPORArt*) and the question of excellence when a CBC program of the same title aired on February 2, 2010.[122] *DIASPORArt* featured works acquired in the Art Bank's 2008–2009 special purchase targeting "Culturally Diverse" artists, and was exhibited at Rideau Hall under the coordination of then Governor General of Canada Michaëlle Jean.[123]

In the CBC program, NGC Director Marc Mayer stated that the NGC was only interested in "excellence" and not cultural diversity.[124] An open letter released in response to Mayer's comments equated his promotion of excellence with hegemony and questioned whose excellence he was concerned with:

> In the 1960s, when cultural institutions like NGC only showed the work of white men, we were told it was because there were no women or people of colour making "good art." Today you tell us that NGC doesn't show ethnic minorities because they are not achieving "excellence." The simplistic notion that connoisseurs know "good art" was thoroughly discredited by 20th-century feminist and post-colonial writers, artists and activists... we know "excellence" when we see it, and today we prefer to call it hegemony.[125]

This evolution in collection contents is not just a business-minded convenience, it is a necessity. Requiring all art to be assessed on "equal" standards of "excellence," as in earlier years, overlooks intersectional layers (e.g., requiring artists to

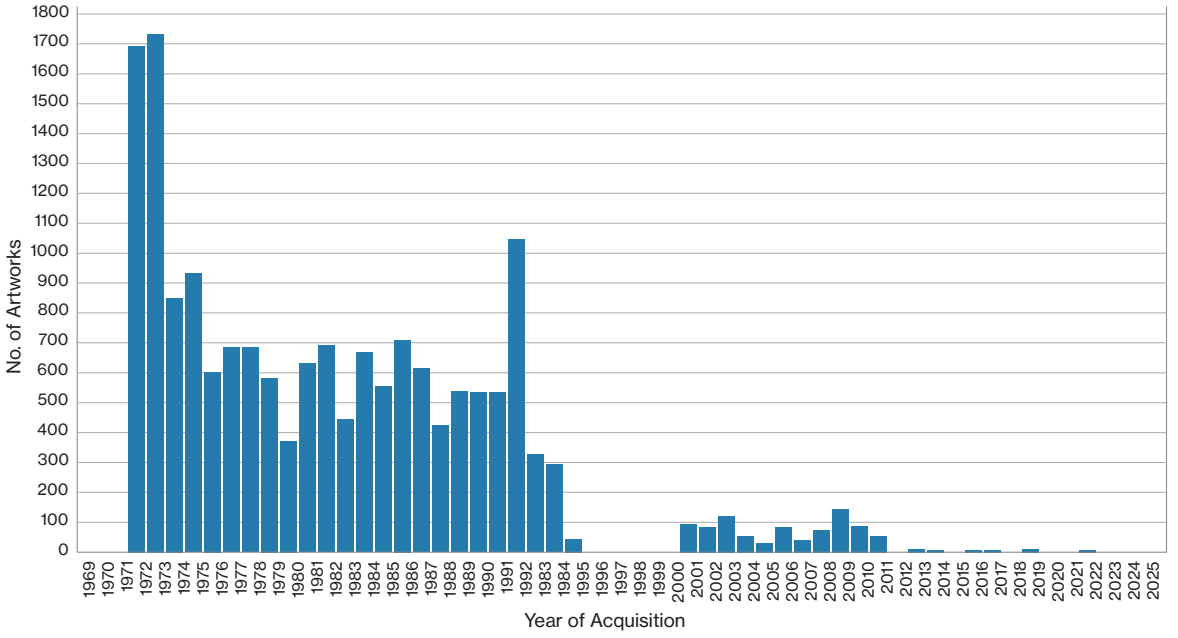

fig. 10 Artworks Acquired by Year, in Jacoba Krina Van Hoeve, "ARTiculating Canadian Identities: The Canada Council Art Bank's Mycelial Presence and Influence in the Realm of Canadian Fine Art" (Master's thesis, Carleton University, 2024), 101, https://doi.org/10.22215/etd/2024-16134.

have "professional" experience listed in their acquisition application)[126] that make such a levelling impossible to implement. Increased diversity strengthens the Art Bank's collection. The lack of diversity within the collection at the time when the most financial resources were available (as of 2022, 94.8 % of the collection was acquired prior to 2000, fig. 10) poses lasting consequences and challenges today. This situation requires an approach of caution and care, which is discussed in the final section. Overall, the Art Bank's cost-recovery phase demonstrates a non-linear progress, wherein a productive and responsive cyclicality puts existing resources to strategic use in the present. Progress is not always reflected in a linear accumulation of resources over time. The institution's own decline set the stage for the necessary regrowth of the collection. Rather than retiring the Art Bank, the ABTAC suggested to repurpose the collection; the Art Bank had to scale down and create breathing room for the collection to grow, and to earn money to reinvest in the institution and collection in the process.

FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY: 2015–22

Since 2016, the Art Bank has adopted a cautious, strategic, and critically self-aware approach in response to economic recessions and the COVID-19 pandemic under the leadership of Amy Jenkins. Jenkins studied at the University of Ottawa and spent the first years of her career working at the NGC, in Visitor Services and as an Exhibition Manager. In September 2001, she became an Art Consultant at the Art Bank, then Head of the Art Bank in 2017.[127] Jenkins summarizes the Art Bank's business today as art rentals, exhibitions and outreach, and loans.[128]

For Jenkins, the fiftieth anniversary in 2022 was a milestone moment that initiated a new phase of reflection around "what has served the Art Bank well and what should be changed going forward."[129] Steps that demonstrate this critical self-reflection include a special Fiftieth Anniversary Open Call for purchases, prioritizing gaps amongst equity-deserving groups in the collection, with a budget of $600,000.[130] Seventy-two works were purchased from the 1,748 eligible submissions received,[131] and a selection of these works was exhibited at Âjagemô, in a show titled *Coming into Sight* (fig. 9).[132]

Cyclical histories of recurring obstacles and solutions are prevalent in the Art Bank's institutional history and underline the need for critical self-reflection. From the early 1990s to 2018, there was no formalized funding for Art Bank's exhibitions and outreach. In 2018, the exhibitions and outreach program was (re) established and formally funded by the Canada Council's parliamentary appropriation, receiving dedicated staff and a budget.[133] Saada El-Akhrass, the Art Bank's Exhibitions and Outreach Officer, worked to support non-profit arts organizations and emerging artists in Montreal, then worked for the British Council as an Arts Manager before joining the Art Bank in 2022. El-Akhrass observes that there are currently few resources for the program, but many possibilities.[134] One of those possibilities, which Jenkins would like to see materialized in the future, is the international touring of exhibitions programmed for Âjagemô.[135] The Art Bank would benefit from an adjusted operating model that prioritizes the connections between artists, art, and the public over financial returns. These interpersonal dynamics were valued when non-revenue generating programs were developed in the 1970s, and this process of receiving validation for exhibitions and outreach was repeated in 2018.[136] More recently, the Art Bank has fostered and welcomed activities that recall the spirit of Kirby's "open door" approach in the 1980s and '90s. Creative workshops were held in Âjagemô in 2025 to coincide with the *Resistant Fibres* exhibition,[137] bringing values of community and collaboration (for which the Art Bank was appreciated in the past) to life in the present. Furthermore, a course taught at Carleton University by Dr. Ming Tiampo in Winter 2026 contributed research to the Canadian BIPOC Artists Rolodex[138] by curating an exhibition titled *Rebellion: The Power of Narrative*.[139] The exhibition gradually

fig. 11 At 921 St. Laurent Boulevard, students browse through racks of artworks in the warehouse, April 1, 2026. Photo: Janneke Van Hoeve. From left to right: Kate Fowler, Megan Dunlop, Yuen Ying Tam, and Patrick Kennedy. For additional photos and details, see Alyssa Tremblay, "From Essays to Exhibitions: New Course Turns Students Into Curators of Contemporary Canadian Art," Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Carleton University, May 4, 2026, https://carleton.ca/fass/story/from-essays-to-exhibitions/.

developed throughout many class brainstorming sessions, visits to the collection, and guidance from Art Bank staff (fig. 11). A catalogue essay written by student Mary Chiasson highlights the final themes: "...by addressing critical histories, diasporas, sexuality and identity, nature and human interference, as well as survivance and futurity, this exhibition asks us to not only reflect on the place of BIPOC persons in Canada, but how all of us can challenge oppressive systems."[140]

Discussions around necessary changes cover various aspects of the Art Bank, including the cost-recovery model. Cost-recovery does not financially fulfill the potential to promote, care for, and renew the collection.[141] The Art Bank also needs greater investment,[142] so that purchases can be seen as an act of recognition towards artists rather than an expense for the Canada Council.[143] The question of who has the means or privilege to rent from the collection today also remains important.[144] Meanwhile, operating with fewer financial resources than ever has pushed the Art Bank to become increasingly compliant and responsive in its decision-making, using their limited resources cautiously—a strategy that curtails innovative risk-taking and development. This is reflected in the (in)ability to make informed decisions in the present, which requires a comprehensive understanding of the institution's past, so that prior (preventable) barriers are not recreated. As previously noted, many transitions and developments within the institution have not been adequately documented and discussed. Because of this, notions of continuance and the challenging of past harmful practices have gained increasing prominence around the fiftieth anniversary. Another future focus area

is collection management. Jenkins is working on a new framework that would allow the collection to become iterative (more flexible and responsive, for the sake of sustainability).[145] It does artists a disservice if their work never leaves the warehouse, and the mandate requires the Art Bank to support contemporary artists by circulating and supporting their work.[146] A revolving collection is imagined as a standard for the Art Bank in the 2020s, rather than the necessity that it was in the early 2000s.

The loan program demonstrates the use of limited resources to advance the collection. Loans allow the Art Bank to support institutions with lower acquisition budgets and slower loan approval rates[147] and allow display for works that are difficult to rent.[148] Artists also receive new exposure through the loan program, and clients are indirectly attracted. Currently, the loan program is part of the funding allocation for exhibitions and outreach.[149] It is an impactful resource for the curation of exhibitions of contemporary Canadian art today.[150] Another example of the strategic and careful use of limited resources is the development of "mainlines" within the collection, or the intentional devotion of special attention to select areas, particularly the inclusion of artists from diverse and underrepresented demographic backgrounds.[151] This direction of special interest can be read into the frequency of a work's circulation between clients and exhibitions.[152] Particularly through works selected for exhibitions, a language is offered through which to view, appreciate, and understand artworks. For example, two copies of *Woman Reading on Bus, Tehran, Iran* (2006) by Sanaz Mazinani were included in the fifty-five works purchased as part of the targeted acquisition of "Culturally Diverse" artists between 2008 and 2009.[153] As of 2023, *Woman Reading on Bus* has been featured in six exhibitions coordinated by the Art Bank[154] and displayed (for rental, loan, or an exhibition) sixteen times in total.[155] Notable public-facing exhibitions that featured *Woman Reading on a Bus* include the ByWard Market Courtyards;[156] *DIASPORArt*;[157] *Looking the World in the Face*,[158] and *New Faces: Portraits from the Collection of the Canada Council Art Bank*.[159] Most of these exhibitions or special projects were concerned with highlighting (or, as is the case for *Looking the World in the Face,* analyzing) the Art Bank's collection as diverse and relatable to broad demographic groups in Canada. For example, the exhibition handout for *DIASPORArt* states that Mazinani's photograph "projects a sense of freedom that contradicts so many preconceived ideas, cliches and stereotypes."[160] In contrast, on average, works in the collection have been displayed around eight times in total.[161] Contemporary acquisitions such as the fiftieth anniversary Open Call are informed by this "mainlined" approach. The challenging of representational gaps formed in the past needs to be dealt with strategically in the present, through methods that are mindful of the future. This resonates with the desire to avoid repeating past mistakes or unintentionally building new blind spots into the collection.[162]

Today, the Art Bank is sustained by a cautious, strategic, and critically self-aware approach to its operations and mandate. This extends to the increasing attention directed to representational gaps and demographic diversity within the collection, and the circulation of the collection to reach new audiences. It seems that the Art Bank, in true cyclical nature, is gradually returning to an active environment of intergenerational collaboration and exchange, albeit in careful balance with business and operational obligations.

CONCLUSIONS

In the 2020s, absences in art-institutional collections, scholarly analyses, documentations, and discussions pose a critical challenge to the desire to contend with and address histories of bureaucratic exclusion and bias. Revisiting and retelling institutional histories to reveal their complexities and entanglements facilitates a cohesive understanding of past, present, and future considerations around an art institution's identity.

Throughout the formative early years under financial and administrative restraints, the Art Bank encountered many obstacles. Nonetheless, the Art Bank indirectly contributed to the development of a market for contemporary Canadian art (the "Art Bank effect"). This was in no small part due to mutually beneficial relationships between governmental art collections. Following this, non-revenue generating programs were heavily challenged from within the Canada Council as a waste of resources. However, such initiatives led to indirect financial growth and longevity through community networks. While the near-closure and transition to a cost-recovery model tend to be seen as the Art Bank's low point, we should reconsider this as evidence of the importance of cumulative, non-linear progress. Finally, the Art Bank's current state helps us understand why a climate of caution, responsiveness, and strategy is a beneficial path towards new growth. Without revisiting and retelling institutional histories that identify dynamic connections between the past and the present, it is difficult to properly contend with and address our institutional exclusions and biases.

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