

For immediate release

New Canada Council program supports de-colonization of Canadian art museums

Ottawa – The Canada Council for the Arts is shipping pallets of instant mashed potatoes to Canadian art museums as part of a new program supporting the critical evaluation of museum collections. According to a spokesperson, the goal of the program is to enable museums to assess the extent to which artworks, artifacts, library and research materials in their collections manifest or reinforce oppressive colonial attitudes.



Staff at the National Gallery of Canada welcome first shipment of mashed potatoes under new Canada Council de-colonization program.

Jeanne-Claude Belliveau, officer overseeing the Decolonizing the Museum program, says the program was developed in response to requests by a new generation of museum professionals who are eager to ‘set the record straight’:

“Many young professionals entering the field have expressed to us their feeling of oppression in the workplace, where they are surrounded by art and artifacts created under imperial powers and that symbolically represent the many prejudices that underpin the often-violent oppression of ‘the other’ under colonization. We want to acknowledge their pain and give them tools so they can make a practical, physical difference.”

Staff in the recently formed Department of People, Culture and Belonging of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa welcomed the shipment. They are reported to be undertaking an audit of the entire collection of 75,000 works for traces of colonialism.

The office of the Chief Strategy and Inclusion Officer at the NGC is reported to have instructed staff to leave no stone unturned. According to the revised strategic plan, it is

the NGC's mission to identify every instance of colonial influence in the collection acquired, who donated it, the artist's affiliations and beliefs, the work's subject matter, its critical, historical placement, and its exhibition history including corporate sponsorships. Even the art materials used will be scrutinized for such things as toxic effects on workers in their production and production by child labour.

The National Gallery of Canada was founded by John Campbell, 9th Duke of Argyll, spouse of Queen Victoria's fourth daughter, Princess Louise, during his tenure as Governor General of Canada between 1878-1883. The collection now includes over 75,000 works estimated to be worth \$1.4 billion (NGC Annual Report, 2020).

In response to questions whether the Canada Council Program will support more extreme measures like de-accessioning, repatriating artworks or returning them to donors, M. Belliveau stated,

"Our goal is to empower the museums to make decisions and take the actions they think appropriate to ameliorate the situation. No one can be seen to be endorsing or perpetuating colonialism today, but what that means for the individual museum is up to them."

When questioned as to a connection between the Canada Council's initiative and recent activism targeting high value artworks in museums, M. Bellevue commented, "We would of course not sanction any kind of destruction or harm to artworks but I cannot say what the museums will do with the materials. It is enough for us that they should be available."



On October 23, 2022 climate activists threw mashed potatoes at a painting by Claude Monet on exhibit in Potsdam, Germany, Each then glued a hand to the wall and shouted demands for climate action. Video still, Credit: Letzte Generation, via Associated Press.

The Canadian Museums Association reports there are over 2400 museums in Canada but only a minority, approximately 75, are art museums, with visual art collection and exhibition programs. Canada Council was asked to comment whether the mashed potato program would be extended to all museums funded by them but as of this writing has not responded. They also have not disclosed how much mashed each museum is to receive. A pallet of mashed potatoes such as that pictured is worth approximately \$1400.

April Fool's!