

# **Impact of the Pandemic**

## **Perspective of the Canadian Museums Association**

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### **Impact of the pandemic on museums**

Many surveys and studies have been done on local, national, and international level examining impact of the pandemic on the functioning and the future of the museum sector.

We know that the effects have been innumerable: many layoffs, several museums could not reopen for summer, those that did had reduced visitors, costs of implementing safety measures were high and sometimes prohibitive, risks to collections were cited, reduced revenues reported widely. With the second wave of infections, museums that re-opened had to close again. Uncertainty about the future of some museums has risen.

International studies (UNESCO, ICOM, AAM) suggest at least 1/8 museums worldwide will not survive. Given that the pandemic effects are ongoing it is premature to state what the overall or longer-term impact will be. What is evident, however, throughout the field, is that the resiliency of our institutions has been reduced over the past decades. Museums need to espouse a long-term goal of increasing their resiliency.

So what are the key activities and roles of a museum association in these troubled and unpredictable times?

### **The CMA's role, challenges and accomplishments**

The immediate action of the Canadian Museums Association (CMA) was to engage with the office of the Minister of Canadian Heritage, which is responsible for the heritage, sport, tourism and culture industries, and the Department of Canadian Heritage to advocate for urgent and sufficient emergency funding for museums. We also increased communications with our members and sister organizations to keep the sector informed of developments, establish a channel of communication between the department, ourselves and our partners, and help guide decisions regarding the emergency funding. Given our relationships with provincial and territorial museums association, the CMA is well positioned to identify and communicate the needs of museums across the country as well as inform them of the government assistance available.

In order to help strengthen the resiliency of museums we advocated for core and stable funding and for the support for museum associations across the country. We also advocated for updating the museum assistance program to reflect contemporary museum activities and needs.

Most importantly, we argued for updating national museum policy.

Canadian national museum policy is more than thirty years old and is outdated. Updating of the policy was established in the government's mandate and we argued that this was a priority that could not be set aside especially in a time of crisis. This is why.

A national museum policy sets out a strategic vision for all types of museums as social institutions that provide directions to increase the impact and sustainability of the museum sector.

More specifically, for Canada, it would aim to preserve and maximize the content of collections to tell the story of Canada, inclusive of its cultures. A strong, refreshed national museum policy would allow for the further digitization of collections and empower a greater collaboration and sharing of Canada's cultural heritage.

A strong national museum policy is also vital for helping to ensure a sustainable future by addressing key societal issues including, promoting environmental sustainability, truth and reconciliation, and social inclusion. Furthermore, museums help educate all Canadians, while also encouraging culture of innovation through research and collaboration.

An updated national museum policy would help our sector set up for success by directly aligning on priorities, challenges and opportunities of Canadian society and government initiatives to assure the vitality of our museum institutions.

A national museum policy also helps foster a workforce that reflects current best-practice and foresees the future developments of museums. A refreshed and up-to-date national museum policy would provide an overall vision for Canada's public and private types of museums to help ensure the financial sustainability of the sector, and to increase its resiliency to meet future challenges, expected and unexpected.

## **Impact of the CMA's work**

In this pandemic time, the CMA has had some successes and some outstanding challenges remain.

At the start of the pandemic, we organized a virtual national conference including all provincial and territorial museum associations to discuss challenges and solutions to the crisis. We also invited Minister Guilbeault who addressed the conference and responded to questions. We organized another session at this conference that included other cultural and heritage organizations such as the National Trust, Alliance of Natural History Museums, Zoos and Aquariums, and the Canadian Association of Science Centres.

At the same time, we increased our advocacy efforts by writing letters, statements, submissions and proposals to federal decision makers. We connected with other influencers such as heritage critics and relevant parliamentary committees, drawing their attention to the situation in which museums find themselves. We engaged in a number of open dialogue meetings with the Department of Canadian Heritage and gave a record number of media interviews for our association.

We also conducted a round table with emerging museum professionals where we addressed the future of museums, mostly in the near-term, but also long-term outlooks.

We released a GLAM (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) study by Oxford Economics on the value and role of the sector in society which demonstrates that museums bring \$2.9B/year in economic benefits; for every \$1 society gets \$4 in benefits; and that the sector contributes significantly to the improvements to literacy, online environment, social inclusion, and overall health. We also produced a toolkit, thanks to some funding from Libraries and Archives Canada, to help the GLAM sector make further use of the findings.

The most significant success we had was in actively engaging with the Minister and the Department, which resulted in obtaining: some \$53M for emergency funding dedicated to museum sector; reduced barriers to access the emergency funding (simplified process, adjusting parameters) in support of smaller museums and flexibilities granted by the government regarding our existing agreements and commitments, to the benefit of our museums. We also obtained new agreements to help our own association's stability.

However, as of yet, while it clearly remains a commitment by this federal government, we have no take-up on national museum policy renewal and although in new supplementary mandate letters there are signals about additional help for culture and heritage, there is no concrete information on longer-term emergency support.

### **Examining broader and longer-term perspective**

Our society and the museum sector are experiencing multiple crises. There is a general understanding that crises accelerate certain trends - crises exacerbate inequality within a system and create economic and political dislocation. But they also stimulate innovation and new ways of doing things. There is often a shift from efficiency to resilience; a rethinking of urgency vs. importance; individual vs. collective interests; economic vs. health values; and national vs. global responsibility. All of this to ensure greater robustness of our institutions and protections. We may not know when our society will return to a new normal but we know that new ways of doing, acting or being will crystallize.

The pandemic has meant that our museums have shifted their way of working to emphasize and deliver content online. With practice, our accelerated learning about various online platforms and ways of communicating virtually will be enriched. These forms of communication will continue to permeate the thinking and work of museums, but in a more sophisticated way. We will know how to differentiate which type of communication and programming is best suited for online. And we will also learn how to complement online learning with peer and social learning in general.

Museums will also push efforts for digitizing collections so that their ability to deliver content will be more diverse and resilient. Digitization will also increase the ability to share collections and decrease the need for preserving multiple examples of artefacts or ecofacts. Increased sharing of information and guidelines across the country – and beyond our borders -- will continue as a part of our learning from this current pandemic. The value of working collectively will be enhanced.

I also believe that the crisis will make clear what we excel at and value most.

I believe that the emotional and intellectual value of real experiences, and seeing real artefacts, will be more deeply appreciated, as will sharing in vivo experiences with friends, family and even strangers in public places. The experience of a museum, be it a building or place, will not and cannot be substituted by any virtual tour. And, museums will need to build on their experimentation in order to enhance in-person experience and learning.

The pandemic is providing proof that the most disadvantaged are the most vulnerable. I hope this understanding will lead us to support and strengthen institutions with fewer resources and great responsibility, such as small museums and Indigenous cultural centres across Canada. Strong, sustained work from these smaller institutions will only strengthen our contributions as a sector.

I suspect that more manageable and sustainable infrastructure will be favoured and ambitions for large buildings with huge maintenance costs will need to be rethought. Architects are already thinking of reorganizing large spaces into a series of smaller spaces to increase the efficiency. The parameters of collecting will also be reconsidered, and with it the pruning and sharing of collections could become a necessary practice for museums and their survival.

Most importantly, our sector will need to reorient public policy towards collective security, including preparedness and resilience-building in the face of more potential crises. We know that science is warning us about climate change and its consequences for our way of living and working. This is a great time to start considering such issues as well and the time to demand from governments higher effectiveness.

I am certain that we learned from this crisis that our relationship with nature will need to be reexamined. Not only will our cities create more open spaces and extend walkways and bike lanes, but we will need to consider our relationship to other species and our relationship to the planet as a whole. And there is a certain role for museums in this dynamic, particularly in helping to educate the public.

I am optimistic about the future of museums. We will come out of the pandemic better informed and better prepared to face new possibilities and adversities collectively. Together, we will need to insert ourselves into the primary concerns of the Canadian government, building on our reputation, trust and contribution to Canadian citizens.

### **What you can do**

We hope that our university partners and audience will encourage policy renewal that reflects contemporary Canadian society. You can amplify our message on this as well as our joint message on the role and value of museum in society.

We hope that in dialogue with other partners we all will be able to imagine a more sustainable and creative future for museums worldwide as well as within our borders.

In closing I wish to invite you to join the CMA to strengthen our museum sector.