

CANADIAN MUSEUMS ASSOCIATION

Museums Together Virtual Conference April 16, 2020

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Hello. I'm Jack Lohman. I am the CEO of the Royal British Columbia Museum and I also have the privilege of being the President of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Museums Association – the CMA.

I am glad that, despite these incredibly difficult times and despite the fact that we had to put off our National Conference to November as a result of the pandemic, that we have found a way to gather together, virtually, to discuss issues of mutual concern.

I would like to begin my remarks by saying a few words about the response to COVID-19. The government has much on its plate to address the challenges Canadians and industries are currently facing. We sincerely appreciate the Federal and essential services' response to date. Health care workers, civil servants, the scientific community, community-facing charities, those working in care, education, transport, food distribution and supply and many other essential services have responded with grit and alacrity. We are deeply in their debt.

I want to signal my appreciation toward the CMA, as the national association representing and federating Canada's museum sector, for the work it has been doing to advocate on behalf our sector, and the provincial and territorial museums associations that are collaborating along with the CMA on these initiatives.

The entire museum sector should also be congratulated for its response. All provinces and territories have seen a proliferation of community-led museum support initiatives, organized at the very local level; initiatives such as collecting masks from museums, gloves from archives, 3D printing visors for the health sector. These initiatives are where our sector is directly enabling the health sector. This is key to catalyzing changes in behavior that will need to be maintained longer-term, including ensuring that physical distancing does not mean social isolation.

The coronavirus pandemic has shown all too clearly how interconnected and interdependent we are as a sector. As an example, take the importance of science in guiding decision-making in this emergency. Our response is being led by science. The importance of museum-led research was never so significant. Or, take the importance of natural history collections in identifying the outcome of biological interface between species and humans.

This pandemic has shaken the whole world to its very core. Rarely, if ever, has humankind found itself so adrift 'in the same boat', so to speak, in the midst of a devastating storm so destructive to the well-being of individuals, families, communities and nations. The systems and institutions which we have created upon which we depend to hold us together are being tested, rocked, exposed and even destroyed. Whatever the outcome, we know this to be true: we will not, cannot carry on as before because we will all have been changed by this singular event. Our museums here and everywhere are not exempt. As museums, we will need to, and indeed we are forced to reflect upon the impact of the pandemic on our own institutional life and role. Museums traditionally use objects to support the stories we tell. We take, as

far as it is possible to do so, an objective position to be 'trusted tellers of truth' about the past. But when we ourselves are profoundly part of the story we tell, we become subjective as involved and affected subjects. This shift may be seen by some as dangerous but I would encourage us all to see it as vital to our future role and place in the world if we are to be trusted tellers of this truth. As participants in the stories we will tell about this historic, universal event, the value of our offering will go beyond being a reliable authoritative source. Our ability to educate and to influence through the narratives we create in our exhibitions and programming will be grounded in the recognition by our public that our empathy is real and founded in a shared experience. The power of the 'empathetic museum' will be in the recognition of this shared experience, our participation as fellow subjects of this historic moment. This will challenge us to think more about how we create greater empathy-building, immersive visceral activities, how we develop greater connection with communities in co-curating those things that they care about and are vital to their well-being. As I stated earlier, the pandemic has clearly revealed our interconnectedness and interdependence as a sector. It also reveals the same about our relationship with the people and communities we serve.

The coronavirus is also shining a blinding light on our systemic sector deficiencies across Canada. We have not been able to respond with enough pace and scale. Museums have shut, auxiliary, temporary and free-lance workers have lost their jobs. We do not have a clear picture of what collections might be threatened or impacted. There are also deficiencies of joined-up thinking, of data and mapping, of networks, and they all signal a direction – and opportunity - for our future work and focus. Large

legacy institutions like national museums are responding through the only systems they know – systems of governance, economy and finance, technology, public services and civil society – but they have been shown to be too weak to support a national museum crisis. The result has been the emergence of what I would call a ‘solidarity deficit’ in which these versions of what has gone wrong fight it out in a discourse that is polarized and visceral.

In revealing the weakness of the present, this pandemic has already pointed to a need for a bridge to a new future. As we contemplate our future there are three things that I believe must drive the museum community forward:

Greater Solidarity: We urgently need to think beyond specific interventions but look towards the whole museum system in Canada. A whole-system perspective is needed to understand how best to calibrate our work. Forging a national museum strategy is an essential building bloc – now more than ever. This means an ongoing assessment of work across museums, making changes to their delivery where gaps are identified, as well as the continual review of wider system effects (such as how can museums be supported to be more resilient especially when faced with knock-on impacts such as loss of expertise, curatorial support, breakdown of key services or even a disruption by suppliers).

Second Greater Connectedness: Let’s consider a move away from a highly structure program towards a deep commitment to help each other, to flexibility.

Consider the determination to improve outcomes and share data. And work towards an outcome-based results system, a system of national standards for museums. Standards around sound financial management, the security of collections etc.

And, finally, Greater Social Responsibility: Emphasizing the collective power and the social justice power of the work we do. This a version of a joined-up sector that does not simply emphasize nationhood, identity and tradition, but also supports communities, Indigenous diversity and knowledge, social cohesion, science, understanding climate change and learning.

Dear Colleagues,

What we do in this crisis response will have repercussions – direct and indirect - for years and decades to come. Changes in museum practice are by their nature still hard to predict and plan for, but their emergence will need to be anticipated and incorporated into dynamic learning processes for our entire sector.

The future needs a stronger museums network that involves the CMA working with the nationals and with the PTMAs to help us think beyond the shadow of the pandemic to the kind of world we want to forge together. In the world beyond this pandemic, we have to allow ourselves license to revision our purpose, role and practices as museums, in the same way as every other human establishment will need to and must do. The strength or fragility of all our institutions are equal only to the vision, passion and energy of those who create or maintain them and the value and trust placed in them by those for whom they exist.

The CMA is best placed, given its role, to bring the sector together, to offer strong leadership, to encourage transparency about all our efforts. Let us embrace learning from both our successful and our failed efforts to maximise societal benefits museums can and must bring.

Thank you so much for listening.