



ARTS & CULTURE IN CANADA

Fact Sheet

August 2008

Contemporary Aboriginal Arts in Canada¹

- ◆ Artistic expression is at the heart of Aboriginal culture, and Canadian artists and arts organizations are reaffirming the existence and relevance of Aboriginal art forms to enthusiastic audiences both at home and around the world.
- ◆ The successes of these artists and arts organizations are especially important for Canada's Aboriginal youth – having authors, musicians, filmmakers, storytellers, dancers, actors, and visual artists as role models and mentors who strive to protect, nourish and interpret Aboriginal cultures.
- ◆ Aboriginal art is not singular. There has always been a great diversity of Aboriginal cultures and languages.
- ◆ The Canadian Census reported that about 3,100 Aboriginal people were artists in 2001. The majority of these artists were artisans and visual artists.ⁱ

*Artistic expression
is at the heart of
Aboriginal culture.*

Contextⁱⁱ

- ◆ According to the Canada 2006 Census, the number of people who identified themselves as an Aboriginal person, that is, First Nations, Métis and Inuit, surpassed the one-million mark, reaching 1,172,790.
- ◆ The past decade has seen a large increase in the number of Aboriginal people in Canada. Between 1996 and 2006, the Aboriginal population grew by 45%, nearly six times faster than the 8% rate of increase for the non-Aboriginal population.
- ◆ Almost half (48%) of the Aboriginal population consists of children and youth aged 24 and under, compared with 31% of the non-Aboriginal population.

¹ In Canada, Aboriginal peoples include Status, Non-Status First Nations, Métis and Inuit people.

The information in this report will be updated annually with new information that has become available.



**Canada Council
for the Arts**

**Conseil des Arts
du Canada**

Research Office

350 Albert Street. P.O. Box 1047
Ottawa ON Canada K1P 5V8

For more information:

Call: 1-800-263-5588 ext. 4526
Email: research@canadacouncil.ca
Website: www.canadacouncil.ca

Publication aussi offerte en français

Photo: Martin Lipman

- ◆ Of those people that identified themselves as an Aboriginal person in the 2006 Census, 50,485 (about 4%), reported that they were Inuit.² This was a 26% increase from 40,220 in 1996.
- ◆ According to the 2006 Census, just over three-quarters of Inuit in Canada (78%), or about 40,000 people, lived in one of four regions within Inuit Nunaat. This is the Inuktitut expression for 'Inuit homeland,' a region stretching from Labrador to the Northwest Territories.
- ◆ The 2006 Census recorded over 60 different Aboriginal languages spoken by First Nations people in Canada, grouped into distinct language families. These include Algonquian, Athapascan, Siouan, Salish, Tsimshian, Wakashan, Iroquoian, Haida and Tlingit.

History of Contemporary Aboriginal Arts in Canada

- ◆ While art has been produced by First Peoples since time immemorial, and is known to most Canadians as artifacts in museums, its inclusion in the euro-western paradigm of fine art is recent (1950s and 60s).ⁱⁱⁱ
- ◆ The contemporary period of Inuit art began in the late 1940s. When the federal government recognised the potential economic benefit it actively encouraged the development and promotion of Inuit sculpture. Further to this, Inuit-owned cooperatives were established in the 1950s and 60s in most Arctic communities, as well as art marketing agencies in southern Canada.^{iv}
- ◆ Contemporary First Nations art began to be noticed as a particular type of artistic production during the early 1960s with the work of the Woodland School of Art and Legend Painters Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Alex Janvier, Norval Morrisseau, Daphne Odjig, and Carl Ray.^v
- ◆ Expo 67, a turning point in the history of Aboriginal artistic expression, provided the first opportunity for Aboriginal people from all parts of Canada to work on a project designed and realized entirely by them. For the tepee-shaped “Indians of Canada Pavilion,” artists from different cultures created murals blending Western technique with Aboriginal ideas and concepts.^{vi}
- ◆ Storytelling has always been a vital part of the cultural identity of the Aboriginal peoples of Canada. Stories are told to teach lessons, strengthen cultural ties, to entertain, and to keep history alive.^{vii}

² Although single and multiple responses to the Aboriginal identity question are possible, only the population reporting a single response of 'Inuit' is included. Inuit of the western Arctic are known as Inuvialuit. In this report, the term 'Inuit' includes Inuvialuit.

Aboriginal Artists in Canada³

- ◆ The 2001 census reported that about 3,100 Aboriginal people were artists in 2001, accounting for 2.4% of Canada's 130,700 artists. However, evidence suggests the number is much larger as there are artists in art forms outside of those recognized in the standard census definitions of occupations. Further to this, many Aboriginal artists do not identify with the Western definition of art and artists.⁴
- ◆ The two most common arts occupation groups for Aboriginal artists are artisans and craftspersons (1,300) and painters, sculptors and other visual artists (500).
- ◆ Aboriginal artists have low average earnings (\$16,900), 28% lower than the average for all artists (\$23,500). The average earnings of Aboriginal artists reflect the low earnings for Aboriginal people in Canada's overall labour force.
- ◆ In 2001, British Columbia was home to the largest number of Aboriginal artists, with almost one-third of the country's Aboriginal artists (about 900 artists or 29% of the Canadian total). These artists account for 3.8% of all artists in B.C. In Alberta, 2.6% of all artists are Aboriginal.
- ◆ Further to this, the highest concentration of Aboriginal artists occurs in Canada's three territories. Combined, the Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut are home to close to 400 Aboriginal artists, 54% of the total number of artists in the territories (nearly 700).
- ◆ Aboriginal artists are nationally and internationally acclaimed in a variety of disciplines including Rebecca Belmore and Alex Janvier (visual arts), Douglas Cardinal (architecture), Zacharias Kanuk (film making), Jim Hart (sculpture), Tanya Tagaq (music), Tompson Highway (theatre) and Santee Smith (Dance).

³ Sources:

Hill Strategies. "Diversity in Canada's Arts Labour Force: An Analysis of 2001 Census Data." Statistical Insights on the Arts, Vol. 3 No. 3, Feb. 2005. http://www.hillstrategies.com/docs/Diversity_arts.pdf

Hill Strategies. "A Statistical Profile of Artists in Canada: Based on the 2001 Census." Statistical Insights on the Arts, Vol. 3 No. 1, Sept. 2004. http://www.hillstrategies.com/docs/Artists_in_Canada.pdf

⁴ Trépanier, France, "Aboriginal Arts Research Initiative – Report on Consultations," Canada Council for the Arts, January 2008. http://www.canadacouncil.ca/publications_e/research/art_abo/uy128716664297918944.htm

Aboriginal Arts Organizations

- ◆ The activities of Aboriginal arts organizations encompass storytelling, drumming, throat singing as well as music, dance, writing and publishing, visual art, media arts, theatre and curatorial practises.
- ◆ Today, there are over 120 Friendship centres located across Canada which provide cultural programs, language training, skills development as well as other programs and services of a culturally appropriate manner.⁵ Many Centres also have arts and crafts shops and organize pow wows and other cultural events throughout the year.^{viii}
- ◆ Professional development is an important aspect of the mandates of Aboriginal media arts organizations, with a specific focus on training, mentoring and workshops for Aboriginal youth. Media arts are seen as an important outlet for artistic endeavours in Aboriginal communities because they have been used to document social issues, work towards social change and make Aboriginal culture more accessible.^{ix}
- ◆ The mandate of Aboriginal dance groups in Canada ranges from preserving cultural heritage to bringing Aboriginal culture to a wider public to encouraging and educating young people. The work performed by Aboriginal dancers is often based on traditional methodologies of performance and culture and incorporate other art forms such as storytelling, theatre, filming, singing, live music, masks, and ceremonial objects.^x
- ◆ Approximately 107 Aboriginal arts organizations were funded by the Canada Council for the Arts in 2006-07. These include dance and theatre companies, publishers, artist run centers, music groups, media arts centres, culture centres and multidisciplinary arts organizations.
- ◆ Aboriginal arts organizations are nationally and internationally acclaimed in a wide variety of disciplines including Red Sky Performance (dance/theatre), Urban Shaman Gallery (visual arts), imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival (media arts) and Kegedonce Press (writing and publishing).
- ◆ Aboriginal artists and their organizations received little funding from the Canadian art system until after the 1960s. The excellence of their art forms was not recognized nor was sufficient support provided to build appropriate infrastructure. Nevertheless, in the past few years this situation has begun to change with programs like the Canada Council's Capacity Building Initiative: Annual Support for Aboriginal Administrative Artistic Practices (Pilot) program and the Aboriginal Peoples Collaborative Exchange: National program which supported the Fifth National Aboriginal Art Administrators and Funders Gathering in 2006.

⁵ The concept of a "Friendship Centre" originated in the mid-1950s when many Aboriginal people were moving to larger urban areas in Canada. In an effort to address the needs expressed by their communities, concerned individuals began to push for the establishment of specialized agencies.

Public Interest in Aboriginal Arts

In 2005^{xi}

- ◆ Over one half of Canadians (55%) say that they have been exposed to Aboriginal culture within the past year with nearly two in ten (18%) saying that they have had a lot of exposure. Two in ten (21%), however, say that they have had no exposure at all to Aboriginal culture within the past year.
- ◆ Prior to National Aboriginal Day (June 21), three in ten Canadians (31%) said that they were aware of the day with six percent saying they were very aware. However, this number increases somewhat when the same question is asked after June 21st. Four in ten (41%) say that they are aware of National Aboriginal Day and those that say they are very aware increases to 10 percent.

In 2004^{xii}

- ◆ Seventy-seven percent of respondents feel that there is a great deal to learn from Aboriginal heritage, culture, and the unique relationship between Aboriginal Peoples and the land.
- ◆ Seventy percent of Canadians with exposure to Aboriginal arts and cultural activities agree that Aboriginal arts and cultures play an important role in Canada's tourism industry, both domestically and internationally.

Aboriginal Peoples Participation in Arts

On-Reserve^{xiii}

- ◆ Seven in ten First Nations people who live on a reserve participated in traditional or cultural activities, a rating that has increased since 2003. While the availability of activities and opportunities to participate in traditional activities varies by reserve, focus group participants stressed the importance of traditional activities in encouraging pride, and restoring self-esteem and community health.
- ◆ Just over half of First Nations people who live on a reserve have used the Internet in the past three months. Among Internet users, there is significant use of and interest in websites that are specifically targeted to Aboriginal people for training and learning or related to language, culture, arts and heritage.

Off-Reserve^{xiv}

- ◆ When asked about participation in any groups, organizations or events in their community, just over two in ten say that they participate weekly, while 27 per cent participate on a monthly basis. Twenty-four per cent are active in this way on a yearly basis, and about one-quarter never participate. Among participants, six in ten say that they typically participate in Aboriginal groups, organizations or events.
- ◆ Roughly half (53%) of Aboriginal people who do not live on a reserve watch the Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network (APTN) on a daily basis. Of those who watch it regularly (i.e., daily), most watch APTN for between one to two hours daily (41 per cent), and less than one in ten (eight per cent) spend three or more hours each day watching APTN. APTN viewership increases with age: fewer than half of youth watch it daily, compared to 60 per cent of those 55 and over.

Aboriginal Arts and the Government

- ◆ The Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC) began in 1856 with a small collection of Aboriginal pipes and stone tools and has now become one of the world's leading museum institutions and home to over 3 million artifacts. Today, the CMC collects and exhibits and displays contemporary Aboriginal art. The First Peoples Hall brings together approximately 2,000 historical objects, contemporary works of art, historical illustrations, photographs and videos from the CMC's collection and other public and private collections.^{xv} The CMC has a First Nations Curator of Contemporary Canadian Aboriginal Art on staff.
- ◆ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)'s National Indian and Inuit Art Collection is comprised of over 4,000 works of art by Canada's most prominent First Nations, Métis and Inuit artists as well as works by young emerging and mid-career artists. The Centre was created in 1965 to support the development of Aboriginal artists working in the traditional art forms, as well as those working in the contemporary fine arts.^{xvi}
- ◆ The National Gallery of Canada has collected works by Aboriginal artists since the early 20th century. The National Gallery's Collection of Indigenous Art includes First Nations, Métis, and Inuit artworks, with an emphasis on contemporary art from 1980 to the present day.^{xvii} The National Gallery also has a First Nations Curator of Indigenous Art on staff and has had two solo exhibitions featuring the art of Norval Morrisseau and Robert Davidson.
- ◆ The development of programs that meet the particular needs of Aboriginal artists and arts organizations is a priority of the Canada Council for the Arts. Beginning in 1994, with the creation of the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat, the emphasis on Aboriginal arts at the Canada Council was increased significantly in 1998-99 with additional funding for dedicated programs in media arts, dance, and visual arts. Between 1997-99 and in 2002, the Canada Council hired six Aboriginal program officers; there are now Aboriginal officers in music, dance, visual arts, theatre, media arts, and writing and publishing.
- ◆ The Aboriginal Affairs Branch at Canadian Heritage established the Aboriginal Peoples' Program in 2005 which, through its Aboriginal Organization component, provides funding to representative organizations and national women's organizations; through the Aboriginal Communities component, supports Aboriginal youth, Aboriginal women and friendship centre organizations; and finally, through the Aboriginal Living Cultures component, support is given to Aboriginal languages and cultures and Aboriginal broadcasting.^{xviii} Further to this, the Aboriginal Languages Initiative (ALI) was established in 1998 in response to government commitments to work with Aboriginal people to preserve and protect Aboriginal languages.
- ◆ Various other federal and provincial departments now have programs providing funding to Aboriginal arts including the Department of Foreign Affairs, Industry Canada and the National Film Board.

Aboriginal Arts in Canada Today

- ◆ Today the film, television and new media industry is an exciting new sector in Nunavut's economy, and a vital part of the promotion of Inuit culture and language world-wide. Igloodik Isuma Productions is one example of this as their films extend the ancient art of storytelling into the digital age through video art and filmmaking, appropriating these technologies to present to the world a discourse from a distinctly Inuit point of view.^{xix}
- ◆ The Canada Council for the Arts provided an estimated \$5.9 million in funding to Aboriginal artists and arts organizations in 2006-07. It should be noted that this figure is an underestimate as Aboriginal artists do not currently self-identify on Canada Council grant applications except under dedicated Aboriginal arts programs.^{xx}
- ◆ The Canada Council Art Bank currently has a total of 836 art works by 221 Aboriginal artists, 12 of which were purchased in 2006-07. In 2003, Art Bank Director Victoria Henry said "We receive numerous requests for Aboriginal art from our rental clients, and it has been a challenge to meet the demand." Thus, in 2003 a special purchase of 71 works by 61 Aboriginal artists was made to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Art Bank and increase the number of works by Aboriginal artists in the collection.^{xxi}
- ◆ In December 2007, the National Gallery of Canada Foundation announced the creation of the Audain Curator of Indigenous Art Endowment which was made possible through a gift of \$2 million from the Audain Foundation. The Audain Curator of Indigenous Art is responsible for exhibitions, acquisitions, loans, research, and publishing in relation to the care and promotion of the collection of Indigenous Art.^{xxii} The Aboriginal Curatorial Residency program was also established in 2007 as a partnership initiative between the Canada Council and the National Gallery which provides a two-year development opportunity for one mid-career curator of Aboriginal ancestry.
- ◆ In 2007, Daphne Odjig, one of Canada's most celebrated Aboriginal painters and printmakers, was awarded the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. Her work has addressed issues of colonization, the displacement of Aboriginal peoples, and the status of Aboriginal women and children, bringing Aboriginal political issues to the forefront of contemporary art practices and theory. Further to this, Kenojuak Ashevak and Alex Janvier won the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts in 2008.
- ◆ Aboriginal artists across Canada are reinventing old traditions and embracing forms of new media such as digital art, electronic and spoken word performances. Circus arts and hip-hop are becoming increasingly popular modes of expression among Aboriginal youth.

Additional Information and Resources

The Aboriginal Canada Portal

www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca

Aboriginal Leadership at The Banff Centre

<http://www.banffcentre.ca/departments/leadership/aboriginal/library/>

Canadian Heritage - Aboriginal Peoples' Program

http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pa-app/prog-home_e.cfm

Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

www.ainc-inac.gc.ca

The National Association of Friendship Centres (NAFC)

www.nafc.ca

Native Dance

<http://natedance.ca>

Native Drums

www.natedrums.ca

- ⁱ Hill Strategies. “Diversity in Canada’s Arts Labour Force: An Analysis of 2001 Census Data.” *Statistical Insights on the Arts*, Vol. 3 No. 3, Feb. 2005.
http://www.hillstrategies.com/resources_details.php?resUID=1000081&lang=0
- ⁱⁱ Statistics Canada “Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006: Inuit, Métis and First Nations, 2006 Census: Findings.”
<http://www12.statcan.ca/english/census06/analysis/aboriginal/index.cfm>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Concordia University. “First Nations Art.”
http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/ic/can_digital_collections/artists/introduction.html
- ^{iv} Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. “Canadian Inuit Sculpture in Recent times.”
- ^v Concordia University. “First Nations Art.”
http://epe.lac-bac.gc.ca/100/200/301/ic/can_digital_collections/artists/introduction.html
- ^{vi} Canadian Museum of Civilization. “Art as an Expression of the Group.”
<http://www.civilization.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/aborig/fp/fpz4h01e.shtml>
- ^{vii} Aboriginal Youth Network. “Aboriginal Cultures and Traditions – Storytelling.”
<http://www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca/acp/site.nsf/en/ao30905.html>
- ^{viii} National Association of Friendship Centers. “Our History.”
www.nafc-aboriginal.com
- ^{ix} Hill Strategies. “Media Arts Study and Profile, Phase 1.” May 2003.
http://www.canadacouncil.ca/publications_e/research/art_disciplines_sect/or127233400123125000.htm
- ^x Poirier Communications. “Findings from the Survey with Aboriginal Dance Groups and Artists in Canada.” (Prepared for the Canada Council for the Arts), November 2003.
- ^{xi} INAC. “The Landscape - Public Opinion on Aboriginal and Northern Issues.” Ottawa, 2005
<http://dsp-psd.pwgsc.gc.ca/Collection/R1-23-2005E.pdf>
- ^{xii} Canadian Heritage. “Analysis of the 2004 Ipsos-Reid Public Opinion Poll: Public Views Regarding Aboriginal Peoples.”
http://www.pch.gc.ca/pc-ch/pubs/tourism/documents/2006-03/index_e.cfm
- ^{xiii} EKOS Research. “First Nations People Living On-Reserve.”
<http://www.ekos.com/admin/articles/firstnations2006e.pdf>
- ^{xiv} EKOS Research. “Survey of First Nations People Living Off-Reserve, Métis and Inuit.” October 2006.
http://knet.ca/documents/OFF_RESERVE_SURVEY_E1.pdf
- ^{xv} Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation. “First Peoples Hall.”
<http://www.civilization.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/aborig/fp/fpint01e.shtml>
- ^{xvi} Indian and Northern Affairs Canada. “Indian Art Centre.”

^{xvii} National Gallery of Canada. “Aboriginal Art in the Collection of Indigenous Art.”

<http://national.gallery.ca/english/110.htm>

^{xviii} Canadian Heritage. “Aboriginal Affairs: Aboriginal Peoples’ Program.”

http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pa-app/prog-home_e.cfm

^{xix} Nunavut Department of Economic Development & Transportation. “Film, Television and New Media.”

<http://www.edt.gov.nu.ca/lookupnunavut/film.htm>

Soukup, Katarina. “Travelling Through Layers: Inuit Artists Appropriate New Technologies.” *Canadian Journal of Communication*, March 30, 2006, 31(1).

<http://www.cjc-online.ca/viewarticle.php?id=1755>.

^{xx} Canada Council for the Arts. *Funding to Artists and Arts Organizations: National Overview, Provincial and Territorial Profiles, 2006-07*. National Overview.

<http://www.canadacouncil.ca/NR/rdonlyres/0C9CEE3C-39BF-46B9-BAF2-17D55E11BFC6/0/OverviewEN.pdf>

^{xxi} Canada Council for the Arts, Art Bank. “Art Bank purchases 71 works by Aboriginal artists.” Ottawa, March 11, 2003.

<http://www.artbank.ca/News+and+Events/News+Releases/ab0301.htm>

^{xxii} National Gallery of Canada. “National Gallery of Canada Foundation Receives \$2 Million Gift to Endow Gallery’s Indigenous Art Curatorial Chair.” Ottawa - December 11, 2007.

http://www.gallery.ca/english/2059_1957.htm