

The Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room of the Senate of Canada

Recognizing a disturbing absence of Indigenous representation within the federal Parliament buildings, the author endeavoured to acquire and donate Indigenous artwork and artifacts to display in the Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room of the Senate of Canada. With help from a group of senators in an effort to make Indigenous cultures visible and tangible to parliamentarians who used the room, as well as to visitors interested in the Senate and its history.

Hon. Serge Joyal, Senator



Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room

The construction of Canada's Parliament Buildings began in 1859 on unceded Algonquin territory. At the time, Indigenous representation was not deemed important enough to be incorporated into the capital's new buildings. Until 2000, little of Parliament's interior or exterior decor reflected the centuries-old presence of Indigenous peoples all across

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Canada, except for small, discreet bas-relief sculptures carved into the facade of Centre Block in 1918 when it was rebuilt after the fire of February 3, 1916; eight architectural works by Indigenous artists, carved from soapstone and Indiana limestone and installed around the House of Commons Foyer as part of the Indigenous Peoples Sculpture Program in the early 1980s; and the bust of Senator James Gladstone [picture: Bust of Senator James Gladstone by Rosemary Breault-Landry, Gatineau (Quebec), 2000, © Senate of Canada] from the Blood (Blackfoot) First Nation, who in 1958 became the first Indigenous person to be appointed to the Senate. The bust was unveiled in 2001 and placed in the Senate antechamber.

It was not until 1997, when a former interior courtyard of the Senate was converted into a modern committee room and designated the “Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room” that Indigenous peoples were finally acknowledged by name in the Parliamentary Precinct. The House has had the Commonwealth Room since the 1960s, and the Senate has had the Salon de la Francophonie since the 1990s. Therefore, both linguistic communities were already well-represented in the Parliament Buildings. In the years after it was inaugurated, the Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room had hardly any direct references to Indigenous realities: there was no Indigenous artwork or artifacts to properly represent their history, culture or identity. This modern committee room, where meetings were often televised, did not provide any visible Indigenous presence in Parliament.



“Mother and child” by Henry Napartuk, Inuit (Kuujjuarapik, Québec), 1963



Eagle Mask by Wayne Bell, Kwakiutl (British Columbia), circa 2000

This re-appropriation of an important space for Indigenous peoples within the Parliamentary Precinct, though supported in principle by the Senate Committee on Internal Economy, did not come with an initiative to feature Indigenous art or artifacts, nor did it include funding to give this room the real content it needed to reflect its name.

Faced with this obvious void that was, in a way, humiliating for Indigenous peoples—their presence essentially erased—I took the initiative, starting in 2002, to acquire and donate Indigenous artwork and artifacts in an effort to make Indigenous cultures visible and tangible to parliamentarians who used the room, as well as to visitors interested in the Senate and its history.



1. *Bad Medicine Woman* by Daphne Odjig, Ojibwe (Wikwemikong Reserve, Manitoulin Island, Ontario), 1974
2. "Inuksuk" by Ernie Kadloo, Inuit (Pond Inlet, Nunavut), 2009, donated by Senator Willie Adams
3. *Wihitkow II* by Neal McLeod, Cree, (James Smith Cree Nation, Saskatchewan) 2001
4. *Indian Residential School 1934 - A prison or a school?* by Alanis Obomsawin, Waban-Aki, (Odanak, Quebec)
5. *Hebron Series #2* by Heather Igloliorte, Inuit (Happy Valley-Goose Bay, Newfoundland and Labrador), 2002-2003

The Senate Committee on Internal Economy approved the installation of these donated works in the Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room under two conditions. First, the works would have to feature a spectrum of Indigenous artists from across Canada to highlight the diversity and originality of Indigenous cultures. The second—more pragmatic—condition was that it would have to cost the Senate nothing. In other words, there would be no budget for Indigenous visibility in the room.

The Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room had to essentially rely on private donations to live up to its name. I had the privilege of donating all the artwork at the outset. Then, other senators followed suit: Senator Thelma Chalifoux (Metis), Senator Willie Adams (Inuit), and Senator Michael Meighen and Senator Nancy Ruth, both from Ontario, all donated art when they retired from the Senate.

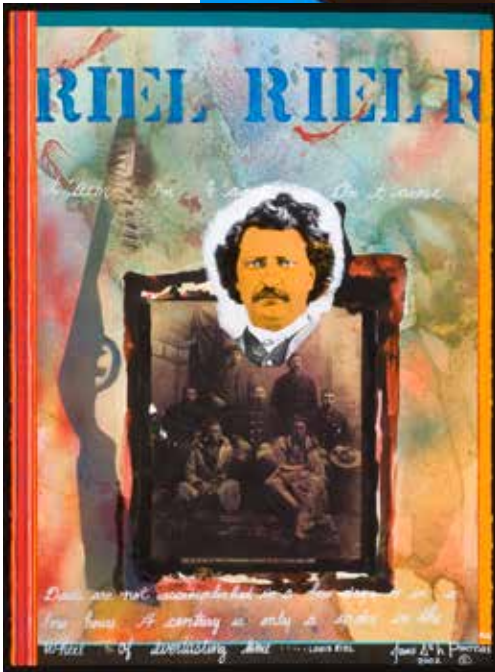


Most of the works include references to mythology, rituals and spiritual values unique to Indigenous peoples and deeply rooted within their special bond with the earth, the land and nature. They reflect the vitality and rebirth of Indigenous peoples' expression of their culture and their claim to a distinct identity grounded in their ancestral traditions and practices.

Some of the works depict the dark chapter of Indian residential schools during which 150,000 young Indigenous children were torn from their families and forced to abandon their languages, cultures, traditions and distinct ways of being, while others show how Indigenous peoples were utterly dispossessed of their ancestral land. The works of Waban-Aki artist Alanis Obomsawin, including *Indian Residential School 1934 - A prison or a school?*, and Inuit artist Heather Igloliorte from Newfoundland and Labrador, including *Hebron Series #2*, are troubling reminders of Canada's century-and-a-half-long assimilation policy with regard to Indigenous peoples. Additionally, Cree artist Neal McLeod's powerful artwork *Wihitkow II* illustrates the acculturation of Indigenous peoples after centuries of devastating colonial policies.



May Tea? by David Garneau, Metis (Edmonton, Alberta), 2002



Riel-Riel-Riel by Jane Ash Poitras, Cree, (Fort Chipewyan, Alberta), 2002

Some works are a true manifesto for affirming identity, such as *Riel-Riel-Riel* and *Dumont – 1885 – Batoche*, both by Cree artist Jane Ash Poitras, which recall the struggle of the Metis in western Canada

to have their land rights recognized. Others evoke a reclamation of lost identity, such as Metis artist David Garneau's painting *May Tea?* and Ojibwe artist Carl Beam's troubling work titled *Parts*.

Parts by Carl Beam, Ojibwe (M'Chigeeng, Manitowlin Island, Ontario), circa 1995



A number of the donated objects and artifacts reflect the political and social affirmation of Indigenous peoples, their economic survival and their struggle against cultural assimilation brought about by the dominant colonial practices.

Deerskin moccasins and mohawks (traditional roach headdress) are two striking examples of the appropriation of Indigenous culture by European settlers that can still be found to this day in Western fashion. Moccasins have been a fashion staple across generations due to their simple design and comfort, while mohawks (traditional roach headdress) were a sign of fearlessness for American parachutists in the Second World War and peaked in popularity during the punk movement of the late 1970s.

After all, who is not moved by the aesthetic of Inuit art or art from West Coast First Nations, for instance Salish and Haida peoples? Who is not touched by the stunning free line work and expressive content of their paintings and sculptures?

Mi'kmaq box, Maritimes, early 20th century



Pair of young women's moccasins, probably Mohawk, Eastern Forests, circa 1880



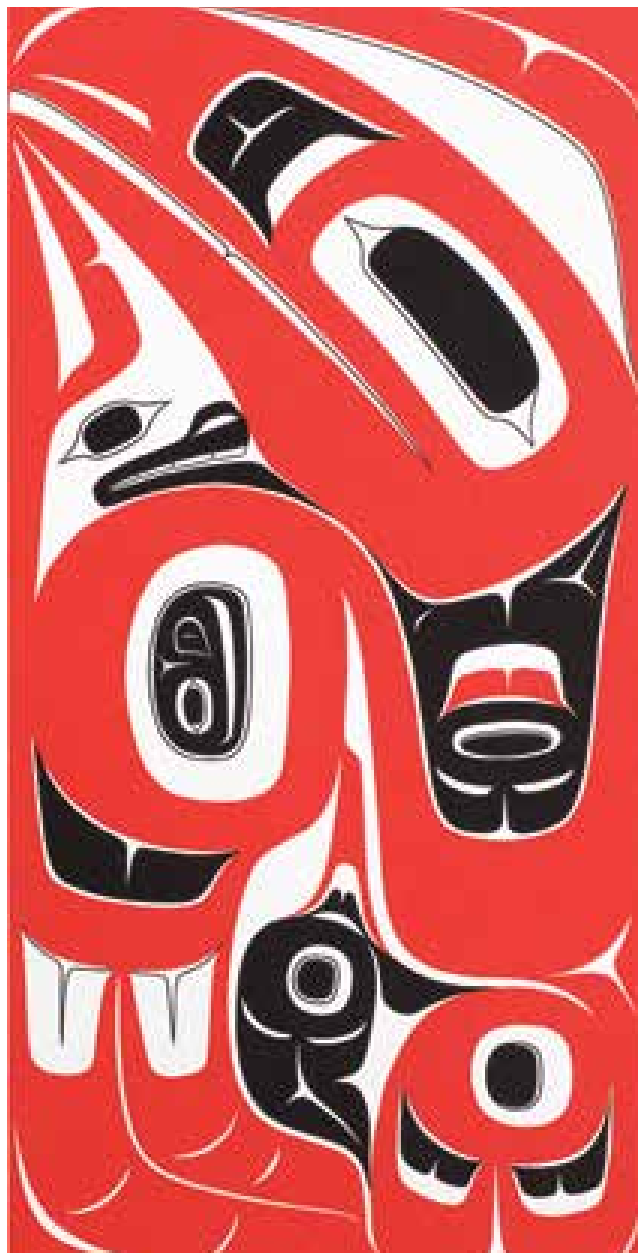
Indian Drums by Allen Sapp, Plains Cree (Red Pheasant Reserve, Saskatchewan), circa 1972

This initiative to make Indigenous identity visible in one of the Senate's most frequently used committee rooms is essentially due to the efforts of individual senators who believed in the importance of immediately making the unique aspects of Canada's Indigenous peoples visible; this action occurred well before the federal government officially apologized to the victims of Indian residential schools in 2008, tabled the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's report in 2015 and fully recognized the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2017.

The initiative taken by those senators 20 years ago was well ahead of the curve; some of the people who were briefed on the project even doubted whether there were enough active Indigenous artists across Canada to provide the art for the Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room!

When I took it upon myself to assemble a collection of various works, I visited art galleries that showcased Indigenous art, such as the Canadian Guild of Crafts in Montreal. I pored over auction catalogues in search of works by Indigenous artists such as Alex Janvier, Daphne Odjig, Norval Morrisseau and Allen Sapp; I visited galleries in Vancouver to acquire West Coast masks; and I directly contacted a number of artists (Jane Ash Poitras, Glenna Matoush, Heather Igloliorte, John Paul Murdoch, Alanis Obomsawin, Patrice Awashih, David Garneau, Ellen Gabriel, Neal McLeod and others) to commission original pieces.

All these works were donated to the Canadiana Fund for the official residences and transferred to the Senate as long-term loans in 2005. Thanks to the joint efforts of the members of the Senate's Artwork Advisory Working Group and particularly its former chair, Senator Wilfred P. Moore, the works were successfully displayed in the room and educational booklets were handed out to visitors to Parliament to explain the origin and meaning of each of these artworks and artifacts.



***Raven* by Eugene Alfred, Tutchone/Tlingit (Mayo, Yukon), 2003**



***Beluga* by Yvonne Kanayuq Arnakyuinak, Inuit (Baker Lake, Nunavut), 1975**

The culmination of this initiative occurred on December 14, 2017, when an Indigenous ceremony devoted to traditional masks was hosted by Cree Senator Lillian E. Dyck in the Aboriginal Peoples Committee Room and presided over by retired Akwesasne Mohawk Grand Chief Michael Kanentakeron Mitchell of the Hadui society, who confirmed the sacred nature of this room that featured many examples of living Indigenous identities that at long last had their rightful place within the Parliament of Canada.



***Omega Mountain Man* mask by Earl Lewis, Coast Salish (British Columbia), second half of the 20th century**



***Pug Wees* mask by Joe Peters Jr., Kwakiutl (British Columbia), 1984**

The Senate is grateful to the National Capital Commission for the loan of these works of Aboriginal art donated through the Canadiana Fund to the Official Residences Crown Collection by the Honourable Serge Joyal, Senator, P.C., O.C.