VICTORIA'S PUBLIC ARTS HERITAGE

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SITUATION BRIEF # 29

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Public art is variously commemorative, celebratory, narrative and decorative. Its role is to reference and preserve popular memory, confirm community identity, promote beliefs, challenge existing norms, or merely beautify public spaces.

Public art has been in play throughout the entire life of the Victoria region. In the early villages of the Lekwungen Speaking People it took the form of interior house posts and panel paintings signifying ancestral lineages and clan memberships. These totemic or crest carvings, along with those of other PNW First Nations, were for instance memorialized in the interior decorations of the ballroom of Government House as designed by Maclure and Rattenbury in 1902 although in this case they were "appropriated" by a Settler interior decorator and muralist, James Bloomfield.

Most of the local municipalities have arts supporting mission statements i.e.: "The Municipality of Oak Bay seeks to increase the livability and artistic richness of the community by making art accessible in public places and to create a legacy for future generations." Its commitment is indicated by the commissioning of the recent (2017) Create Victoria Arts & Culture Master Plan which opens with the vision statement: "Victoria radiates creativity and thrives as a home for creative people and everyday artistic encounters." Coast Salish artist Dylan Thomas is its first Indigenous Artist in Residence.

Formal public art programs exist for commissioning new art or encouraging developers to include art in their building projects. Municipalities also play a role in jurying those commissions. Oak Bay combines a public open-air sculpture festival with private sponsorships purchasing exhibited pieces for the permanent installation in public places.

Neighbourhoods celebrate (and market) their resident artists by organizing annual studio tours. These effectively engage the local public in art appreciation and provide marketing opportunities for artists. One of the most ambitious is the Moss Street Paint In, a plein-air exhibition lining several blocks of

a major Fairfield thoroughfare. It is organized by the Greater Victoria Art Gallery. Victoria has a been commissioning public art for over 50 years.

Of the major early public sculptural commissions that are probably most notable are those for the 1892 Parliament Buildings. Highly visible is the Statue of Queen Victoria by British artist Allen Bruce Joy. Effigies of the 14 founders of the colony and the province including Sir James Douglas and Chief Maquinna, executed by Italo-Canadian sculptor Charles Marega, can be found on the 1911 Connaught Library addition to the Buildings.

Also, from these early years is the City's rich heritage of stained-glass windows observable in the Parliament Buildings and the major downtown churches. Both World Wars have occasioned commissions of memorials and cenotaphs. A good example is the 1925 war memorial in front of the Parliament Buildings executed by British sculptor, Vernon Marech. Another is Oak Bay's (1948) the war memorial sculpture, "Mother Peace," where artist James Saullin Uplands Park used his wife as the model.

First Nations public art returned to the City beginning with the creation of Thunderbird Park in 1941. Starting in 1952 Kwakwaka'wakw artist, Mungo Martin (*Nakapenkem Datsa*) worked as master carver at the BC Provincial Museum. In Beacon Hill Park the "world's tallest totem pole" (1956) is his work along with creation of Thunderbird Park adjacent to the Royal BC Museum. The 1960s was marked by the commissioning of the Centennial Fountain with a mural stele by Jack Wilkinson. Two multi-story mural fronts of the Royal Trust Building on Fort Street illustrating the history of British Columbia were executed by Mexican artist Andres Salgo in 1963 (and appropriated First Nations totemic imagery).

Public art is often controversial. The bust of Queen Elizabeth has been variously vandalized, stolen (and therfore replicated) from its Beacon Hill Park location, then stolen and again later recovered from the Inner Harbour. More

recently the statue of John A. MacDonald was removed from the front of City Hall at the instance of First Nations' objection to his role in founding residential schools. Similarly, during a street protest, the statue of James Cook was torn down and tossed into the harbour.

The last 30 years has witnessed a flowering of contemporary Public Art. Public and private commissions have ranged from commemorative statuary (Terry Fox Statue, Mile Zero) to First Nations Totem Poles (Spirit Park adjacent to Centennial Square). As the Provincial Capital, the City of Victoria receives many gifts, donations and requests from private citizens and organizations to install work in the public realm, especially in the Inner Harbour (which is owned by GVHA, City and Province)

The Capital Region Public Art Inventory lists 170 works of public art. An

analysis of the list reveals a rich variety of types. Seven bronze monumental spindle-whorls mark the boundaries of the original Songhees village site on lands surrounding the Inner Harbour. A series, "Hands of Time", comprises 12 locational sculptures responding to popular histories of local sites of interest. There are 45 wall murals, 84 First Nations works, 89 sculptures, 91 streetscape works, 22 commemorative or memorial works. 39 works refer to personalities or events in the region's history. 35 celebrate the natural environment.

The CRD inventory is not exhaustive. First Nations works in the foyer of Conference Centre, the two blocks of floor-scape art on Broad Street, Thunderbird Park and numerous works assembled in the grounds of Government House Grounds, or the seated statue of Old Town developer, hotelier and arts patron Michael Williams on Wharf Street, among others, are not mentioned.

Observations

- West Coast First Nations poles are customarily deemed to have a "natural life" after which they are returned to the earth. Mungo Martin's Beacon Hill Park "tallest" totem pole is a case in point despite a (2011) restoration. The Province and the City should open a conversation with Martin's descendants and local First Nations as to plans for its replacement, or not.

- The on-line CRD database should have an interactive feature encouraging the public to nominate additions to the list. The site is focused on outdoor public art and does not include indoor collections. It should. The CRD does not manage this inventory. It is up to the individual municipality to update it so it not always the most accurate site for assessing public art inventory. The City of Victoria uses its GIS map to manage the public art it is responsible for.

- Recent history has revealed the problematics that emerge over time in relation to the "celebration" of public leaders. One was the covering up of George Southwell's history murals in the Parliament Buildings, deemed offensive to local First Nations. In line with current calls to decolonize our history, we have learned a lesson to de-emphasis this type of commemorative memorializing in favour of art that addresses community narratives and values of our time.

- The intersection of art and community memory is important in the conservation of intangible heritage. Retelling of shared narratives, confirming community values and prompting public dialogue on issues of general concern

are the benefits of such initiatives. Tours, plien-air education opportunities for all ages, democratic commissioning, can all enhance the general appreciation, and support for, public art programs.

References

For an on-line inventory of public art in Greater Victoria see:
https://www.crd.bc.ca/landmarks/artworks