

SPEAKER ABSTRACTS & BIOGRAPHIES

FINE ARTS AS CROSS-CULTURAL DIALOGUE

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ICOM International Committee for Museums and Collections of Fine Arts

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Renée van der Avoird

Canadian Women Artists at the Art Gallery of Ontario: A Focused Approach

ABSTRACT

The Art Gallery o f Ontario (AGO) in Toronto ha s been hosting a rotating series of exhibitions featu ring works on paper and related materials by Canadian women artists from the AGO ’s Collect ion. Launched in 2018 as part of the newly re -opened J. S. McLean Centre for Indigenous + Cana dian Art, the se rotations, as all displays in the McLean Centre, have included trilingu al text, which includes Anishinaabemowin, English and French. The exhibitions have mostly showca sed single artists, bringing focused a ttention to a unique body o f work, a specific theme, or a material technique, thus generati ng new research and awareness in the growing part of the A GO ’s Collection. The focus on an individual artist ’s practice also allows for timely contemporary conversations. For these rotations, we invite artists whose work we are in the process o f collecting or have recently been brought into the collection for the first time. These projects have provided rich internal research opportunities , as well as curatorial training oppo rtunities for the next generation of Canadian art scholars and curators.

In my presentation for the ICFA ’s 2026 Annual Conference , I will share four key rotations that have highlight ed Canadian women artists whose impact on the trajectory o f Canadian art history has been strong b ut overlooked. P rior to these exhibitions, these artists were either minorly represented in the AGO ’s Collection or not represented a t all.

- Margaret P riest: The Construction Series and Other Concrete Matters (2019-20) - Kim Ondaatje: The House on Picca dilly Stree t (2021-22) - Naoko Matsubara (2025 -26) - Edna Ta ç on: Verve and Deco rum (2026)

In sharing these exhbitions as brief case studies , I would like to reflect on and discuss the following question s:

- Have these exhibitions helped our public understand the barriers women artists have hi storicall y faced, and continue to face ? - What impact have these e xhibitions ha d on the artists (if living), on the institution, and on the field of Canadi an art history? - Has t his series of exhibitions made a difference in how we recognize and celebrate Canadian women artists? - Is this an effective approach to bringing more recognition to Canadi an women artists? - How can we better represent Canadian wom en artists in institutions?

BIOGRAPHY

Renée van der Avoird is Associate Curator of Canadian Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, where she has worked since 2018. She specializes in modern and contemporary Canadian women artists and postwar Canadian art. She holds an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in Fine Arts and French Language and Literature from Wilfrid Laurier University and a Master's degree in Museum Studies from the University of Toronto. Prior to joining the AGO, she held positions as Associate Curator/Registrar at the MacLaren Art Centre, Assistant Director of Susan Hobbs Gallery, and Curatorial Mentor at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Her curatorial projects include *Betty Goodwin: Moving Towards Fire* (2019), *Kim Ondaatje: The House on Piccadilly Street* (2021), *Denyse Thomasos: just beyond* (2022), *Sarindar Dhaliwal: When I grow up I want to be a namer of paint colours* (2023), and *Pacita Abad* (2024). Her writing has appeared in publications including *C Magazine* and *Border Crossings*.

Mengge Cao

From Fine Art to Situated Experience: Digital Curation of Chinese Temple Art at the Royal Ontario Museum

ABSTRACT

How can museums create meaningful and accessible contexts for audiences encountering religious objects that entered their collections as autonomous works of fine art? This paper addresses this question through Chinese Buddhist temple art at the Royal Ontario Museum, focusing on a life-size ceramic luohan and the monumental wall painting The Paradise of Maitreya. Both entered the museum in the early twentieth century through collecting networks associated with key individuals who shaped the museum's collection, including Charles Trick Currelly, George Crofts, and Bishop William Charles White. The mural's original temple no longer survives, while the luohan belongs to a dispersed set whose original site and configuration remain uncertain.

The paper forms part of the Dispersed Chinese Art Digitization Project (DCADP) at the University of Chicago's Center for the Art of East Asia, which combines art-historical and provenance research with 3D scanning, digital reconstruction, and exhibition design. The DCADP team has scanned the ROM luohan and related sculptures in other museums. The team plans to scan the wall painting and its counterpart in the Palace Museum Beijing in fall 2026. Drawing on Fragmented yet Connected: Paths to Wisdom at the Zhihua Temple (2026), an interactive exhibition developed through DCADP, this paper proposes a digital-curatorial model organized around layered episodes in an object's life. Rather than returning an object to a single authoritative "original context," the model invites visitors to move through its possible ritual setting, removal and art-market circulation, acquisition and conservation, installation and continuing reinterpretation in the museum and beyond. Archival evidence, spatial visualization, and interactive storytelling connect these episodes while keeping gaps, competing hypotheses, and unresolved questions visible.

The paper distinguishes this approach from aesthetic display, which presents the object as visually self-sufficient, and conventional contextual display, which supplies a stable account of original function and cultural setting. For dispersed objects, digital curation can instead reveal how meanings accumulate and change across different locations and historical moments through

creating situated experiences. Within the Canadian context, this model situates the objects simultaneously within Chinese religious history, transnational collecting networks, and the formation of knowledge about Chinese art at the ROM. By offering an accessible narrative path alongside deeper archival and interpretive layers, it seeks to foster both historical understanding and emotional connection among visitors with different cultural backgrounds and levels of prior knowledge.

BIOGRAPHY

Mengge Cao is a postdoctoral scholar at the Center for the Art of East Asia, Department of Art History, University of Chicago. He earned his PhD in Art and Archaeology from Princeton University in 2024, following undergraduate and master's studies at McGill University. His research addresses Chinese art history, digital curation, provenance and the interpretation of dispersed cultural objects. He works on the Dispersed Chinese Art Digitization Project and curated Fragmented yet Connected: Paths to Wisdom at the Zhihua Temple (2026). His publications include an article on painting sizes and visual experiences in middle-period China in Archives of Asian Art (2025). He has previously taught at McGill University and held curatorial internships at Princeton University Art Museum and other institutions.

Kanika Gupta

Listening to the Forest: Oral Histories, Indigenous Knowledge, and the Museum as a Space of Community Resistance

ABSTRACT

Listening to the Forest: Oral Histories, Indigenous Knowledge, and the Museum as a Space of Community Resistance

Across the indigenous regions of eastern India, particularly Odisha and Jharkhand, rapid industrialisation, extractive mining, deforestation, and large-scale infrastructure projects have transformed landscapes that have long been sustained through intimate relationships between communities, forests, rivers, and sacred sites. These transformations threaten not only ecological systems but also the oral traditions, collective memories, and knowledge systems through which Adivasi communities understand land, ancestry, and identity. As access to forests shrinks and displacement becomes increasingly common, the spaces for transmitting oral histories and sustaining cultural practices are likewise diminishing. Simultaneously, the criminalisation of protest and the shrinking of democratic spaces have made it increasingly difficult for these communities to publicly articulate their histories and assert their rights.

This paper argues that museums must move beyond their conventional role as repositories of objects to become collaborative platforms for safeguarding living heritage and amplifying community voices. Rather than collecting indigenous cultures as static representations of the past, museums can facilitate participatory documentation of oral histories, songs, ecological knowledge, ritual practices, and memories of environmental change. Such practices acknowledge that heritage is not confined to material artefacts but is continuously produced through storytelling, performance, and relationships with place.

Drawing upon emerging community-led documentation initiatives in Koraput, where indigenous women are mapping changing landscapes through memory and local knowledge, alongside examples from mining-affected regions of Odisha and Jharkhand, this paper explores how oral history itself can become a curatorial practice. The mapping of disappearing forests, water bodies, biodiversity, and customary commons demonstrates that memory is not merely retrospective but also a tool for environmental stewardship, cultural continuity, and community resilience.

The paper proposes a museum model grounded in co-curation, shared authority, and long-term partnerships with indigenous communities. Such museums would function not only as sites of preservation but also as spaces of dialogue, advocacy, and intercultural learning, where contested histories of extraction, displacement, and resistance are represented alongside indigenous knowledge systems. In multicultural societies, this approach enables museums to foster more inclusive narratives, challenge colonial modes of collecting and interpretation, and recognise oral history as an essential form of cultural heritage and community engagement. By centring indigenous voices, museums can become active participants in protecting both cultural diversity and environmental justice.

BIOGRAPHY

Kanika Gupta is an art historian, trained dancer and filmmaker. She holds a master’s degree in Art History from Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda and a PhD from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, on the motif of the female figure and tree in ancient Indian sculpture. She is the author of Lupadakhe – Unknown Master Sculptors of Ancient India (2019) and The Cursed Land of Lustful Women and the Power of Storytelling (2023). Her research encompasses sculpture, mythology, textile and craft traditions, oral histories and documentary film. She has

contributed to collections documentation at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and to projects at the Slovene Ethnographic Museum, including the EU-funded TAKING CARE project and research for White Gold: Stories of Cotton. She has taught as visiting faculty at design institutions in India.

Josh Heuman

From Open Space to Community; Multilingual and Accessible Programmes at Koffler Arts

ABSTRACT

Koffler Arts (https://kofflerarts.org) is a nonprofit, multidisciplinary arts organisation dedicated to celebrating Jewish artistic voices within a broader, diverse framework of contemporary expression. Our mission is to foster an inclusive environment that promotes artistic innovation, nurtures the creation of new works, and facilitates meaningful exchanges across disciplines. Through our extensive network of local, Canadian pan-provincial, and international artists, we aim to cultivate a vibrant platform for artistic dialogue and community engagement.

Since Summer 2025, Koffler Arts has prioritized community engagement focused on multicultural inclusivity. This presentation spotlights three initiatives:

WORLD PLAY: Reading Toronto's many languages, a literary series that showcases the rich linguistic diversity of Toronto, launched in July 2025. During each “Chapter” (there have been 7 so far), texts—including poetry, theatre, fiction, philosophy, song lyrics, etc.—on a common theme in as many as 10 of the over 200 languages spoken in the city can be heard, followed by English translations. This series aims to amplify and celebrate underrepresented voices, foster cross-cultural understanding, and provide an immersive journey into phonaesthetics (the beauty and resonance of language as sound).

Hands-on art-making workshops inspired by (at the time) upcoming exhibitions: in August 2025 before INTERGALACTIC PLANETARY by Tracey Snelling; and, in June 2026 before Plague Crystals by Natalia Romik. These workshops were conducted at community partner sites including Bellwoods Centre, Parkdale Activity-Recreation Centre, Toronto Kiwanis Boys & Girls Club, and West Neighbourhood House. Each organisation serves a different segment of Toronto's diverse population: adults living with physical disabilities; adults and seniors grappling with street life and substance use issues; children and youth seeking wide-ranging experiences that enrich the mind, body, and spirit; and, youth and senior newcomers to Toronto. These initiatives provided accessible opportunities for community members to engage directly with contemporary art practices.

And on 4 December 2025, to complement the exhibition INTERGALACTIC PLANETARY by Tracey Snelling, whose personal visual art aesthetic echoes characteristics of Punk and Hip Hop music, we organized what we believe to be the first public panel discussion in Toronto dedicated to the Punk movement of the 1970s and 1980s. This event not only highlighted Toronto’s role in an important global cultural phenomenon, but also inspired subsequent Punk-themed programming at Peach Berserk in Parkdale, thereby extending engagement with diverse communities.

Learn more about these initiatives and how they exemplify Koffler Arts’ commitment to engaging multicultural communities through innovative programming that celebrates diversity and fosters dialogue.

BIOGRAPHY

Josh Heuman is Head of Artistic Engagement at Koffler Arts, where he is focused on developing a wide array of public programs for audiences of all ages. He has held previous positions in education, exhibitions, and administration at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Salt Lake Art Center; Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art at Utah State University; and Joslyn Art Museum. Heuman has delivered guest lectures and participated in panel discussions at numerous galleries/museums and postsecondary institutions. He earned a BA in Visual Art and MA in Art History at York University.

R. Stuart Keeler

Beyond the Vault: Decolonizing a Corporate Art Collection through Relationships, not by Acquisition Alone

ABSTRACT

Corporate art collections have historically operated as instruments of institutional prestige, built through acquisition logics inherited from the museum sector without a museums' public mandate or accountability structures. This paper examines an ongoing effort to decolonize one such collection — TD Bank's Art & Heritage Collections —(Toronto, Ontario based with Canadian mandate) not by expanding the inventory of Indigenous Peoples made art objects, rather by reorienting the underlying relationship between a financial institution and the communities it collects with as a priority. TD Bank has been collecting contemporary art since 1963 and Indigenous Peoples Art since 1967 and committed to a shared understanding and evolving social impact frameworks for meaningful exchange.

The paper argues that decolonization in a corporate context cannot be reduced to acquisition targets or representation counts. Drawing on Glen Coulthard's grounded normativity and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's resurgence theory, this paper and approach proposes a working distinction between the *collector* and the *steward*: the collector accumulates objects as assets; the steward enters an accountable, reciprocal relationship with the artists and communities whose work is held. Practically, this has meant reorienting acquisition geography away from major urban centres toward northern and non-urban Indigenous communities, aligning collecting priorities with the Canadian Truth & Reconciliation Calls to Action, and treating each acquisition as the opening of a relationship — the "artist as small business" rather than a mere content provider. rather than its conclusion. Internal collaboration with TD's Indigenous Banking line of business practice has been central to testing whether "power with" can be operationalized inside a "power over" institutional structure, and where that structure's finance, risk, and governance functions create culture to support curatorial judgment.

This paper does not offer a resolved model. It surfaces the tensions a corporate steward encounters when reconciliation frameworks developed for public institutions are applied inside a commercial one: whose definition of "quality" governs acquisition when banking relationships are part of the calculus?; What is owed to a community once a relationship, not just an object, has been entered into a collection?; and whether "Fine Art" as a category can hold Indigenous cultural production without re-imposing the colonial frame it was built to house. Peer institutions (Deutsche Bank, UBS, RBC, JPMorgan Chase) offer comparative context but few precedents for this specific reorientation and complexity of the moment we live, share and aim toward true Reconciliation and Decolonization.

The paper closes by asking the conference's own question back to itself: if a pluralistic society doesn't need one universal definition of Fine Art, what does a

financial institution owe the communities whose art it holds under that name? How can social impact happen, without the movement and importance of connecting with community as a key and meaningful point for lasting change?

BIOGRAPHY

R. Stuart Keeler is Chief Curator of Art & Corporate Heritage Collections at TD Bank Group, a role held since 2017. His work connects art and heritage collections with community engagement, social impact and institutional responsibility. He previously held leadership roles at the Art Gallery of Mississauga and in the City of Mississauga’s culture and heritage programmes, and worked with the Chicago Cultural Center. His curatorial

practice includes Indigenous art, public art and community-based cultural projects. He has taught at art schools and universities in Canada and the United States and edited Service Media, a publication on socially engaged art practice. His current work addresses reconciliation and relationships with Indigenous communities within corporate collecting.

Sabah Mahmoud

From Display to Dialogue: Reinterpreting Islamic Art for Multicultural Audiences

ABSTRACT

Museums are increasingly expected to function as spaces for cross-cultural dialogue rather than simply places where collections are displayed. This expectation presents a particular challenge for Islamic art museums, where objects are often presented either as aesthetic masterpieces detached from their cultural and historical contexts or as historical artifacts explained through a single authoritative narrative. In both cases, opportunities for dialogue are reduced.

Drawing on two recent exhibitions curated at the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, this paper argues that dialogue is not simply an outcome of museum visits but a curatorial strategy that can be intentionally designed through exhibition interpretation. The discussion is situated within current debates on interpreting Fine Arts in multicultural societies and examines how curatorial decisions shape relationships between objects, context, and audiences while challenging the conventional divide between aesthetic appreciation and cultural understanding.

The paper adopts a reflective practice methodology combined with comparative analysis of two recent curatorial projects. The first exhibition, developed in collaboration with UNESCO, explored the relationship between authenticity and contemporary artistic practice, presenting Islamic art as a living tradition rather than a closed historical category. The second focused on communicating the aesthetic and cultural significance of Islamic visual heritage to audiences with varying levels of prior knowledge through interpretive texts, spatial narratives, and exhibition sequences that balanced scholarly rigor with accessibility.

Rather than treating these exhibitions as isolated case studies, the paper proposes a Multi-Layer Interpretive Framework for Islamic art exhibitions, using both projects to demonstrate how visual, historical, cultural, and dialogic forms of interpretation can be deliberately integrated to create multiple entry points for diverse audiences. Combining curatorial decision-making with principles of museum learning, the analysis demonstrates that meaningful cross-cultural engagement depends less on providing more information than on carefully designing relationships between objects, narratives, and visitor meaning-making.

Although developed through Islamic art collections, the proposed framework offers a transferable, practice-based model for museums interpreting culturally specific collections within increasingly diverse societies. Ultimately, the paper argues that exhibitions become spaces for cross-cultural dialogue not by providing more information, but by creating richer opportunities for visitors to construct meaning through interpretation and encounter multiple cultural perspectives.

BIOGRAPHY

Sabah Mahmoud is a Museum Curator at the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, Egypt, with more than a decade of professional experience in museums. She holds a Bachelor’s degree in Islamic Archaeology from Cairo University and a joint Master’s degree in Museum Studies and Arts from Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg (Germany) and Helwan University (Egypt). She is currently pursuing a PhD in Heritage and Museum Studies.

Her professional experience spans exhibition curation, museum interpretation, audience engagement, and museum education, with a particular focus on Islamic art collections. She has curated exhibitions and contributed to national and international museum and cultural heritage projects, collaborating with museums, cultural institutions, and international partners. Her work explores how exhibitions can foster cross-cultural

understanding through innovative interpretive approaches.
Sabah has presented her research at international conferences and participated in international museum programs. Her research interests include exhibition interpretation, Islamic art, museum learning, visitor experience, and the application of emerging technologies in museums.

Paola do Amaral Montenegro

The Exhibition Never Ends: Extending Tarsila do Amaral's Legacy Across Museums, Digital Media, Education, and Everyday Life

ABSTRACT

Exhibitions are often understood as temporary events. They open, engage audiences, and eventually close. Yet the narratives they construct continue to circulate long after visitors leave the gallery. Rather than disappearing, these narratives are continually reinterpreted, translated, and recontextualized through museums, educational initiatives, digital mediation, immersive experiences, publications, and everyday cultural encounters. The exhibition, therefore, is not the conclusion of interpretation, but the beginning of an ongoing process through which artistic legacies continue to acquire meaning.

Drawing on the stewardship of Brazilian modernist artist Tarsila do Amaral's legacy, this presentation examines how a coherent artistic narrative can remain intellectually rigorous while being translated across multiple interpretive contexts. Rather than focusing on the exhibition as an isolated event, it proposes understanding legacy stewardship as the continuous work of sustaining, questioning, and renewing the public interpretation of an artist through collaboration among museums, educators, researchers, cultural mediators, and legacy managers.

This practice-based reflection argues that the long-term relevance of an artistic legacy depends not on the repetition of established narratives, but on their responsible translation for new audiences and contemporary cultural contexts. Historical integrity is preserved not by fixing interpretation, but by allowing it to evolve through research, dialogue, and carefully designed forms of mediation that expand access without compromising scholarly rigor.

Using Tarsila do Amaral's legacy as a case study, the presentation contributes to current discussions on the language of display by suggesting that exhibitions should be understood not only as spaces of presentation, but also as catalysts for an ongoing interpretive process. Rather than asking where an exhibition ends, this presentation asks who carries its narratives forward—and how museums, researchers, educators, legacy stewards, and cultural mediators collectively shape an artist's public legacy long after the gallery has closed.

BIOGRAPHY

Paola do Amaral Montenegro is a cultural heritage manager, curator, and researcher whose practice focuses on the stewardship of the legacy of Brazilian modernist artist Tarsila do Amaral. Working at the intersection of museum practice, curatorial research, and cultural mediation, she explores how artistic legacies remain relevant by creating meaningful contexts for diverse audiences across exhibitions, education, digital mediation, and everyday cultural experiences. As steward of Tarsila do Amaral's artistic legacy, Paola leads projects spanning exhibitions, collections management, artwork authentication, educational initiatives, public programs, and collaborative partnerships that expand the artist's contemporary relevance. Her professional practice examines how artistic narratives can be translated across different contexts and languages of display while maintaining historical integrity, intellectual coherence, and meaningful audience engagement. Paola holds a degree in Marketing from ESPM, a postgraduate degree in Cultural Management from PUC-Rio, and a specialization in Museology, Curatorship and Collecting from Centro Universitário Belas Artes de São Paulo. She is currently a master's candidate researching contemporary approaches to artistic legacy stewardship, curatorial practice, and the translation of artistic narratives across multiple interpretive contexts. Her research is informed by daily professional practice, offering a perspective that bridges museum theory and the stewardship of one of Latin

America's most significant artistic legacies. She has presented her work at museum and cultural heritage conferences in Brazil and is an active member of ICOM.

Josephine Nielsen-Bergqvist

The Art of Creating Context for an Art Collection and Its Audiences

ABSTRACT

As Vardemuseerne prepares to create a new home and curatorial framework for its art collection of 9,000 works, the museum faces a unique opportunity: to define what kind of art museum it wants to become.

This paper explores how the development of a new art museum extends beyond the relocation of a collection to include the creation of a new art historical and curatorial framework. Although the collection has always consisted of works of art, it has historically existed within a broader cultural history museum context and has not previously been explored, researched, and presented as a coherent art historical field. The relocation therefore represents more than a logistical project; it offers an opportunity to reconsider how the collection can be understood, contextualized, and displayed.

Developed over more than a century through acquisitions, donations, and museum mergers, the collection reflects changing local priorities, individual benefactors, and institutional histories rather than a single collecting strategy. This diversity is both its strength and its curatorial challenge: how can a collection shaped by multiple histories be presented through meaningful artistic and historical narratives? How can display create context without diminishing complexity?

At the same time, the project raises a broader museum question: how can an art museum remain firmly grounded in art historical scholarship while welcoming visitors with little or no prior experience of art museums? The ambition is not to simplify art, but to create accessible pathways into complex artistic and historical narratives. The challenge is not to lower the level of interpretation, but to remove the barriers that prevent audiences from engaging confidently with art.

Drawing on Vardemuseerne's experience of developing a new cultural history museum designed as a "museum for the many", this paper reflects on how principles of accessibility, narrative construction, and audience engagement can inform the creation of a new art museum. Working under the provisional title My First Museum Visit, the project explores how encounters with art can foster curiosity rather than intimidation, and confidence rather than uncertainty.

Rather than presenting a completed project, this paper offers insight into an ongoing curatorial process: defining how art historical scholarship, display, and audience engagement can come together to create meaningful encounters with art.

BIOGRAPHY

Josephine Nielsen-Bergqvist (b. 1987) is Curator of Art at Vardemuseerne, Denmark. She holds an MA in Art History with elective studies in Communication from the University of Copenhagen. She is currently developing new curatorial and display frameworks for Vardemuseerne's extensive art collection, exploring how rigorous academic scholarship can be combined with inclusive, accessible audience engagement.

Soledad Obeid

An Institutional Perspective on the Art Collection of the Ancient Andean Peoples

ABSTRACT

The opening, in 2019, of a permanent gallery dedicated to the art of the ancient Andean peoples at the National Museum of Fine Arts of Argentina (MNBA) provided an opportunity to revisit traditional categories of art history and reflect on the role of a fine arts museum in fostering intercultural dialogue. The incorporation of this collection into the permanent exhibition not only broadened the chronological scope of Argentine art history but also challenged the ways in which an institution heir to a Western aesthetic tradition defines, classifies, and presents objects produced in diverse cultural contexts that transcend the modern notion of "Fine Arts."

The inclusion of this collection in the museum's permanent narrative represents an institutional and epistemological undertaking: it is not simply a matter of incorporating pre-hispanic objects into a pre-established narrative, but rather of questioning the categories from which that narrative has been constructed. The pieces, produced by various agricultural and pottery-making cultures of northwestern Argentina between the 5th century BCE and the 10th century CE, are a testament to this shift in perspective. The archaeological artifacts of the 1st century BC and the 15th century AD were conceived in contexts where aesthetic, ritual, political, social, and cosmological dimensions did not constitute autonomous fields. Their materiality and technical sophistication express systems of knowledge in which visual production was closely linked to funerary, ceremonial, and propitiatory practices.

Their institutional history is linked to private and public collections, including the Guido Di Tella Collection, the Argentine Foreign Ministry Collection, and a collection incorporated following the implementation of the Law for the Protection of Archaeological and Paleontological Heritage and the registration mechanisms subsequently implemented. Their incorporation into the MNBA (National Museum of Fine Arts) also presents specific challenges related to the documentation, research, and registration of archaeological collections and the registration mechanisms subsequently implemented.

The presentation analyzes the curatorial and museographic decisions that allowed these works to be incorporated into the history of Argentine and Latin American art, paying particular attention to the tension between categories such as "work of art," "archaeological object," and "cultural heritage."

A new interpretive context is offered for these works, avoiding reducing them to their ritual or archaeological function, but also avoiding artificially separating them from the social, cosmological, and spiritual systems that gave them meaning. Ceramics, textiles, metal objects, and other artifacts are understood as productions of specialists—sculptors, ceramists, weavers, and metalworkers—in which technique, iconography, function, power, and spirituality are deeply intertwined.

The experience allows us to question what it means to exhibit "Fine Arts" in a contemporary institution and how to generate narratives capable of including multiple conceptions of art and beauty. The gallery thus proposes a reinterpretation of Argentine and Latin American visual history, establishing dialogues between pre-Hispanic productions, colonial art, and subsequent artistic expressions. More than simply adding a collection to the museum, the aim is to transform the institutional perspective and build a space for encounter between different ways of understanding, producing, and experiencing art.

Using this case as a starting point, we propose reflecting on the Museum of Fine Arts as a space for the production and revision of knowledge. How can we construct narratives capable of including multiple conceptions of art and beauty? How can we generate accessible contexts for diverse audiences without exclusively imposing Western aesthetic categories?

Ultimately, the MNBA's experience suggests that intercultural dialogue is not merely about incorporating other productions into the museum, but about allowing those productions to transform the categories, narratives, and ways of seeing from which the institution constructs the history of art.

BIOGRAPHY

Soledad María Obeid is a cultural manager, curator and researcher with more than twenty years of experience in public institutions, civil society organisations and independent projects. Since 2015, she has served as Coordinator of Institutional Relations at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Argentina, developing partnerships, cross-institutional projects and initiatives relating to accessibility, sustainability and audiences. She has previously worked with Argentina’s national cultural administration and has directed the contemporary visual culture publication Artexto since 2007. Her curatorial and research practice includes contemporary art exhibitions, artistic archives, heritage research and catalogues raisonnés. She holds degrees in Fine Arts and Fine Arts Education from the University of Buenos Aires and is pursuing studies in anthropology.

Ahmed Motawea Hussein Mohamed Shaikhon

Digital Heritage and Museum Narratives: Using Artificial Intelligence to Foster Cross-Cultural Dialogue at Museums and Heritage Sites

ABSTRACT

Museums and heritage institutions increasingly employ digital technologies and AI to connect audiences with diverse cultural narratives. Artificial intelligence (AI), including conversational agents, adaptive interpretation systems, and generative tools, offers new opportunities to facilitate cross-cultural dialogue and enhance public engagement. However, questions remain about how these technologies can be used ethically and effectively while preserving authenticity and cultural diversity. This article develops and applies a documentary coding instrument that records whether public documentation of AI-enabled heritage initiatives describes conditions associated with reciprocity, multivocality, contestation, and community authority, alongside access and interaction. Eight heterogeneous cases are compared: ErfgoedApp/Oehoe (Flanders); Nerone (Colosseum Archaeological Park); the Nikola Tesla Chatbot (Belgrade); Ève (Autun); MUSEO (Canadian Museum of History); ASSIST (a European Commission-funded project); and two participatory research prototypes, “I Recall the Past” and “Being Eroded, Piece by Piece." Sources are peer-reviewed publications, official institutional and project records, and vendor case studies; no system outputs, visitor experiences, or community outcomes were examined. Findings show that AI systems can support inclusive, multivocal interpretation when designed with closed knowledge bases, curatorial oversight, multilingual capacity, and mechanisms for community input. Risks include cultural bias, hallucinated content, reduced authenticity, and limited participation. The paper proposes a provisional six-principle framework (transparency and provenance; cultural sensitivity and plural corpora; community accountability; multivocal design; continuous evaluation and oversight; authenticity as relational practice). The framework is grounded in the cases and aligned with UNESCO (2021), ICOMOS (2008), the CARE Principles and Regulation (EU) 2024/1689, but it is not yet validated by practitioners or communities.

BIOGRAPHY

Ahmed Shaikhon is an Egyptian archaeologist and heritage specialist with professional experience in archaeological documentation, museum interpretation, cultural heritage management, and digital heritage initiatives. His research focuses on the application of artificial intelligence, digital technologies, and participatory approaches in heritage preservation and interpretation. He has worked on projects involving World Heritage sites, archaeological collections, and heritage education programs, with particular interest in enhancing public engagement and cross-cultural understanding through innovative digital tools. His current work explores the integration of AI ethics, virtual heritage, and museum interpretation to support sustainable heritage management and intercultural dialogue.

Kajal Sharma

Layered Interpretation: Rethinking Fine Arts through Museum Objects

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that single-lens disciplinary display — the presentation of museum objects through aesthetic or art-historical frameworks alone — is inadequate to the interpretive demands of collections that are simultaneously religious, political, and material in nature. Building on new museology's shift from object-centred display to meaning-centred engagement, the paper proposes layered interpretation as an alternative framework: a curatorial approach that foregrounds an object through sequential or juxtaposed interpretive lenses — artistic, historical, ritual, political, and linguistic — rather than a single authoritative narrative. Such an approach shifts museum practice from information delivery towards dialogue, participation, and shared meaning-making.
Drawing on the collections of the Samrat Samprati Museum of Jain Heritage, Gujarat, India, the paper examines how layered interpretation reshapes the understanding of Fine Arts within museum practice. Objects such as Tantra-Yantra Pata paintings (cloth paintings depicting mystical ritual diagrams), Jain illustrated manuscripts, and the original Akbar Farman (imperial decree) resist interpretation through aesthetic categories alone; they embody belief systems, knowledge traditions, governance, ethics, and lived experience in ways a single disciplinary frame cannot capture.
Particular attention is given to the original imperial decree, issued by the Mughal emperor Akbar in recognition of Acharya (spiritual teacher) Hirvijay Suri and proclaiming the prohibition of animal slaughter during Paryushan, the annual Jain festival of fasting and spiritual reflection. Conventionally read as an imperial administrative document, the Farman can equally be read as a cultural artefact in which Persian calligraphy, visual form, political authority, and the Jain philosophy of Ahimsa (nonviolence) intersect. Reading these layers together expands what counts as Fine Arts beyond the aesthetic object, and demonstrates how historical documents can function as instruments of cross-cultural dialogue rather than static administrative records.
The paper proposes layered interpretation as a practical curatorial method for exhibition planning, museum education, and public programming, offering curators a means of creating multiple points of entry for visitors of differing cultural and religious backgrounds. In doing so, it argues for a broader, more pluralistic definition of Fine Arts — one better suited to the diverse and multicultural audiences museums today serve.

BIOGRAPHY

Kajal Sharma (Education Curator, Samrat Samprati Museum): A museum professional with experience in curatorial practice, museum education, and audience engagement, she completed her Master’s in Museology from National Museum Institute of the History of Art, Conservation and Museology, New delhi. She previously worked as Museum Curator at Blades of Glory Cricket Museum, where she focused on developing educational programmes and visitor engagement initiatives. Her work and research interests lie in creating interactive museum spaces and making museums more accessible to wider audiences through different interpretive mediums. Currently, she is associated with Samrat Samprati Museum, where she works on audience ngagement, public programmes, and community- oriented museum experiences.

Wan Wan

Heritage in Motion: The Dynamic Cultural Memory Construction in China’s Digital Museums

ABSTRACT

Digital museums are the generators of cultural innovation, building a common field through communication and constantly, awakening the audience to the common memory of culture. Nowadays, digital culture and museums are leaping into a new period of high-quality development, but the new mode of writing cultural memory in Chinese digital museums is still to be explored. Taking the digital museum of Nanjing Museum as a case study, this paper explores the new mediating role of digital museums in constructing cultural memory and its underlying mechanism model through the participatory observation, and big data mining of visitors' online comment texts, rooting theory and word frequency analysis. The study found that digital museums, as a new type of cultural infrastructure, exhibit characteristics of a highly malleable and fluid dynamic memory system. Their cultural memory construction mechanism achieves a fundamental shift from representational reproduction to experiential regeneration, emphasizing a generative, continuous, and individualized memory practice process. Specifically, digital museums reshape memory forms, create dynamic digital landscapes to drive memory flow and connections, and leverage media practices to embody synchronic memory sedimentation. This process fosters diverse identities, strengthens the consciousness of the Chinese national community, and ultimately constructs a digital memory field for civilization. 1

Keywords: Digital Museum; Cultural Memory; Digital Technology; Media Materiality; Cultural Identity

BIOGRAPHY

Wan Wan is a doctoral researcher at the School of Journalism and Communication, Nanjing University, China, and a joint doctoral researcher at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto, Canada. Her research focuses on digital culture, cultural communication, digital humanities, and museums, with particular emphasis on cultural memory and digital museum practices.

She holds a master’s degree in Information Technology in Education from the University of Hong Kong and a bachelor’s degree in Radio and Television Editing and Directing from Nanjing University of the Arts. She also attended a museum studies exchange programme at the University of Pennsylvania.

From 2018 to 2023, she was an Assistant Professor at the Communication University of China, Nanjing, teaching media studies, film and television production, and documentary filmmaking. Her research has been presented at the International Communication Association conferences in 2025 and 2026. Her publications examine digital museums, collective memory, participatory digital curation, and cultural communication in China.

Weiqi Wang

From Open Space to the Museum as an Opener Space

ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, many German museums have introduced so-called Open Spaces as places for participation, dialogue, and community engagement. Usually located near museum entrances, these spaces host hands-on activities, discussions, language cafés, and community-led initiatives that aim to lower barriers and invite diverse audiences into the museum. However, they also raise a fundamental question: can participation programmes transform the institution itself, or do they remain limited offers within existing structures of authority and knowledge production?

This presentation examines this question through a case study of [next;raum], a participatory project developed at the Museum of Fine Arts Leipzig (MdbK) since 2021. Instead of creating a separate community space, [next;raum] was situated within the museum's permanent exhibition. Together with approximately twenty participants from different social backgrounds, museum staff critically explored the collection and its narratives, focusing on questions of representation, gender, accessibility, and exclusion. The collaborative process resulted in workshops, discussions, public programmes, and an exhibition that presented the participants' perspectives within the museum itself, including interventions throughout the institution.

By bringing participants' contributions into the exhibition context, [next;raum] questioned established boundaries between artistic authorship and participation, expert knowledge and lived experience, education and exhibition. The fundamental questions are: Who is authorised to produce knowledge in the museum? What qualifies as art? Who decides what deserves visibility? And whose criteria determine artistic value? What conditions need to be in place for participation to lead to lasting institutional change? How can the knowledge and experiences generated through such processes be sustainably embedded in the museum's institutional structures and everyday practices?

The case of [next;raum] suggests that it is not enough for art museums to open new spaces or develop innovative events and programmes for audiences. More importantly, they need to open themselves up to the possibility of becoming institutions shaped together with their audiences—institutions in which knowledge, interpretation, and cultural value can be collectively negotiated.

BIOGRAPHY

Weiqi Wang is an artist, curator, and art educator. Since 2025, she has been a research associate in the project "Art in Society – Transfer as Practice and Form of Knowledge" at the Braunschweig University of Art (HBK), where she researches Open Spaces in museums and their potential for institutional transformation. Since 2026, she has been teaching at the Institute for Art in Context at the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK Berlin), focusing on artistic practices with social groups and artistic work within and in relation to institutions. Previously, she worked in the Department of Art Mediation at the Museum of Fine Arts Leipzig (MdbK) and as Curator for Diversity and Outreach at MARKK – Museum am Rothenbaum, Cultures and Arts of the World, Hamburg. As an independent community artist, art educator, and scenographer, she supports cultural institutions in developing outreach, participation, and diversi cation processes. Her practice combines collaborative artistic strategies with a critical, anti-discriminatory, and diversity-sensitive approach, exploring how artistic practice can strengthen marginalized perspectives, enable participation, and question institutional stru

Heidi Weber

Labels, Visitors, and Meaning-Making: How Museum Labels Shape Visitor Engagement in a Montreal Case Study

ABSTRACT

This presentation focuses on the impact of museum labels on visitors' relationships with artworks in Fine Art museums. The role of the visitor has evolved significantly since the establishment of museums. From the silent figure of the nineteenth century, in which visitors were viewed as passive recipients of knowledge, to the first half of the twentieth century, when contemplation was considered essential, visitors were often regarded as secondary to the collection and its display. As a result, contextual information was primarily designed for knowledgeable audiences, leaving less-informed visitors without the necessary tools to understand what was on display.

During the 1960s and 1970s, art museums emphasized traditional values such as aesthetics, art history, and contemplation to counterbalance the emergence of more "popular" forms of art and new exhibition practices. Today, however, museums can no longer be viewed solely as repositories of collections. They must engage with their visitors and the diverse communities they serve, supporting them in their meaning-making during their encounter and encouraging their own interpretations.

To better understand how visitors make sense of artworks using the contextual information provided by museums, this presentation examines how different visitors respond to different types of labels at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, specifically the Avant-Garde room. Using the Thinking Aloud protocol, participants were recorded saying out loud everything they were thinking, feeling, imagining, appreciating, disliking, etc. while viewing the artworks. This method allows us to follow their cognitive processes as they engage with the label. To explore the influence of different types of contextual information, we selected three types of labels: the short label, which provides only minimal information; the historical label, which includes information about the artist and the social context; and the artistic label, which focuses on artistic techniques or movements.

The aim of this presentation is to examine whether the context provided by curators on the label is sufficient for visitors to understand what they are seeing, or whether additional types of information should be provided to foster a more satisfying museum experience. While providing contextual information is important, we should never underestimate visitors' own knowledge and experiences as they construct meaning from the artworks.

BIOGRAPHY

Heidi Weber is a doctoral student in Muséologie, mediation, Patrimoine at the Université du Québec à Montréal. Holding a master's degree in Museology from the Université de Montréal, she focuses on the role of objects in exhibitions in various type of museums, as well as their impact on the visitor’s experience, influenced by psychology. Her research aims to better understand how visitors and objects interact, as well as the mechanisms that determine whether this experience is successful or not. By better understanding the experience, museum’s can provide meaningful and satisfying experience. She is an active member of ICOM-CECA and the CELAT.

Elka Weinstein

Norval Morrisseau, Carl Beam and Kent Monkman: Fine Art by Indigenous artists in Canada

ABSTRACT

Norval Morrisseau, Carl Beam and Kent Monkman are three Canadian artists who have challenged the definition of Indigenous art in Canada. This talk will illustrate the themes that link Morrisseau, Beam and Monkman as part of a continuum of Canadian fine art created by Indigenous artists. Morrisseau's subversion and use of "traditional" myths and legends (and Christian tropes as well); Carl Beam's resistance to using Indigenous ideas and themes in his work but still retaining Indigeneity within it; and Kent Monkman's subversion of the techniques of European fine art to illustrate Indigenous and queer themes.

Morrisseau, arguably the most famous of the three, and sometimes called the "Picasso of the North," took what is now called "Woodland Style" art and refined it to a point where his paintings became instantly recognizable and (sadly) easily copied and reproduced. Carl Beam's art is not instantly recognizable as Indigenous art in the same way as Morrisseau, but it has a sensibility that is unequivocally Indigenous and is linked to places and themes that resonate as both modern and Indigenous simultaneously. Kent Monkman (the only one of the three artists still alive and making art) has taken European tropes and used them to illustrate themes that expose the coloniality of Canadian art, from an Indigenous point of view.

All three artists are unique in their style, technique and subject matter but their desire to push the boundaries of what was once considered to be Canadian fine art and Indigenous arts (and crafts) moved art in Canada to a higher level. Landscapes and portraits, basketry beading, and rock art notwithstanding, works created by these artists interrogated 19th century European fine arts to produce art that is truly Canadian.

BIOGRAPHY

Dr. Elka Weinstein is a museum professional and archaeologist with extensive experience in museum administration, curatorial practice, education, public interpretation, exhibition development, and cultural heritage management. She is a former President of ICOM Canada and has served as Museum Advisor with Ontario’s Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Gaming. She holds a Ph.D. in Archaeology and a Master of Museum Studies from the University of Toronto. Throughout her career, she has worked with cultural institutions including the Royal Ontario Museum, the Art Gallery of Ontario, and the Gardiner Museum of Ceramic Art, as well as historic sites in Ontario and Quebec. Her professional experience includes university teaching, international museum education, and collaboration with museums in Latin America. Her work focuses on museum practice, cultural heritage, public engagement, and the interpretation of collections.