

National Portrait Gallery

A high-level group in Ottawa is working to bring new life to a project cancelled by the former Conservative government.

by Paul Gessell

August 24, 2019 12:30 PM



Douglas Coupland's "The National Portrait" appears on publicity material used by a group renewing efforts to create a national portrait gallery. (Courtesy of Simons Collection, photo by Lawrence Cook)

Within a few months of being appointed to the Senate in 2016, Patricia Bovey sent a letter to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau urging the resurrection of plans for a national portrait gallery.

The letter from the former director of the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria was endorsed by some 85 per cent of senators in the Upper Chamber at the time.

Trudeau mailed a reply. "He encouraged us to continue," Bovey, a Liberal-appointed independent senator for Manitoba, said in a recent interview.

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And continue is just what she did, nurturing the dream of reversing former prime minister Stephen Harper's 2008 decision to cancel creation of the gallery, originally planned for the former U.S. embassy across from Parliament Hill.

Since Trudeau took office in 2015, efforts to resurrect a portrait gallery have been inching along, mainly under the radar. But the campaign is about to become more visible and forceful.

Shortly after receiving Trudeau's letter, Bovey attended the opening of the new Ottawa Art Gallery and met Lawson Hunter, the public gallery's outgoing board chairman and the driving force behind its new home. Bovey felt she had found the person to light a fire under the portrait gallery project.



Patricia Bovey

"He's great," the senator says of Hunter, an Ottawa lawyer, former Bell Canada executive and former senior bureaucrat, a man who seems to know every powerful person in the capital. Hunter jumped at the chance to help realize what is tentatively being called the Gallery of Canadian Identity.



Lawson Hunter



Beverley McLachlin



Douglas Coupland



Ann Davis



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The advisory board for the Gallery of Canadian Identity is a group of like-minded people. Hunter is the chairman. Beverley McLachlin, a former chief justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, was named patron. Other catches include Vancouver artist and author Douglas Coupland; Ann Davis, a former professor of cultural studies at the University of Calgary; Indigenous artist Robert Houle; and Sara Angel, the director of the Art Canada Institute, a Toronto art book publisher.

The Royal Canadian Academy of Arts, representing about 600 of Canada's leading artists, threw its muscle behind the project and commissioned Lord Cultural Resources, one of the world's best-known museum consulting practices, to draft a report on the vision and mandate of the proposed gallery. That report could be completed as early as this month, says Robert Tombs, the academy's president.

Discussions between the advisory group and the Department of Canadian Heritage have been held. The office of Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez says the government is not prepared to create a new national museum, but is open to help fund new cultural infrastructure.

Promotional material for the proposed gallery is already circulating. Across the top of each brochure is an image of Coupland's innovative installation *The National Portrait*, a commission by the Simons department store chain that contains hundreds of portraits of average Canadians created by 3D printer in 2018.

Robert Tombs

Coupland's work embodies both the subject and style of the proposed gallery, which aims to emphasize portraits of ordinary Canadians, not just the elites, says Bovey. "We don't want just a bunch of dead white guys painting dead white guys."

Visual artists are creative and will find many other innovative ways of creating portraits, she says.

And Hunter adds that the new gallery will be "a technology-drenched space."

Plans for a portrait gallery were first announced in 2001 during the administration of Liberal prime minister Jean Chretien and continued under his successor Paul Martin. Those plans called for the gallery to be located in the former U.S. embassy.

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But then came Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper, who had other plans, first to locate the gallery outside Ottawa, and then to cancel the project entirely to save money.

Under Trudeau, there was initially talk of reviving the portrait gallery in the former U.S. embassy at 100 Wellington St. But he decided instead to turn the beaux-arts building into a centre for Indigenous art and culture. It is expected to open this fall following renovations.



The former U.S. embassy across from Parliament Hill in Ottawa.



Paraskeva Clark's "Portrait of Frances Adaskin," from the portrait collection at Library and Archives Canada, is on display at the Glenbow in Calgary as part of the show "Ladylikeness."

The original portrait gallery was supposed to exhibit the vast collection of portraits, both paintings and photographs, held by Library and Archives Canada. Since the collapse of the original gallery proposal, Library and Archives has been exhibiting works from its collection in other venues.

The Glenbow Museum in Calgary, for example, has hosted a few exhibitions, including *Ladylikeness: Historical Portraits of Women by Women*, on view until Jan. 5.

It follows an earlier show in the same series, *The Artist's Mirror: Self-Portraits*

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Hunter's group is now looking for possible sites for a new portrait gallery in the Ottawa area, including an old monastery across the Ottawa River in Hull, Que. Bovey agrees the gallery should be located in the national capital area.

It would be built with a mixture of private and public money. Arm-twisting of government and corporate officials will not begin in earnest until after the Oct. 21 federal election, and will proceed even if there's a victory for the Conservatives – the party that cancelled the portrait gallery in 2008. A national media campaign is being planned to promote public – and government – interest in the project.

If there's enough support from the public and private sector, the advisory group will commission a second consultant's study on the gallery's operating requirements.

The office of the heritage minister was asked for comment on the portrait gallery proposal.

"We are aware of the proposal, and officials from our department have been in regular contact with the proponents," Louis Belanger, the minister's director of communications, said in an email. "At this point in time, our government is not planning on the creation of any new national museums."



Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez

But the minister's office does not appear to be closing the door to helping such an institution get some funding.

"Since 2016, our government has, however, been proud to make historic investments in cultural infrastructure, including nearly \$2 billion in support under the Investing in Canada Plan and the Canada Cultural Spaces Fund," Belanger wrote.

"Our government has funded projects such as the Thunder Bay Art Gallery and North Vancouver Museum, we added the Inuit Art Centre to the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and supported brand new facilities like the Remai Modern in Saskatoon and the National Music Centre in Calgary.

"We look forward to continuing to invest in important projects in communities across the country that make them more sustainable and inclusive. We have been clear that providing spaces for our artists to create and showcase their work, and help grow the economy by building up community institutions is a key priority to our government." ■

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