

# Concepts Conference

CANADA WEST

a meeting of  
in western



conference summary excerpts

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During the last decade, national and international interest has intensified in the pursuit of cultural practices and definition of cultural policies. At the international level, U.N.E.S.C.O. has stimulated a great excitement about cultural policy formulation and execution by convening a series of conferences involving representatives from the cultural area from many countries throughout the world. Since the inception of these international conferences, Canada has been strongly represented and has played a major and active role in the drafting of many important resolutions and recommendations.

The formulation of cultural policies is an exceedingly difficult task. A great deal of information must be collected, analysed and evaluated concerning present needs of artists, cultural organizations, governmental cultural agencies and the general public. A great deal of dialogue, discussion and exchange of opinion must take place between governmental representatives and representatives of the cultural community.

Due to the institutional and bureaucratic bias of our society, there is an ever-present danger that the needs and voice of the individual will either not be heard or will be rendered inaudible by the concerns of organizations and agencies. In cultural policy articulation, this must not be allowed to happen since all artistic activity commences with the act of creative expression by the individual artist. In short, without the individual artist, there is no art and consequently cultural policy is irrelevant.

As a result of the danger of overlooking the needs and concerns of individuals, Canada West was organized by the Canadian Conference of the Arts from November 17-19, 1972. Held at the University of Calgary, the objective of Canada West was to provide working members of the artistic communities of B.C., Alta., Sask., and Manitoba with an opportunity to come together, discuss common problems, examine feasible and realistic solutions to these problems, and contribute to Canadian cultural policy developments.

## status of western canadian artists

Western Canadian artists suffer tremendously from a lack of dignity and respect as human beings capable of making a contribution to the society in which they live. This was the overwhelming and unanimous message that came from all the delegates at Canada West. Whereas people in other professions and other walks of life are valued for the nature of their contribution to social progress, artists are treated not only as a minority group, but also as a group that is perceived to be expendable by society at large. This represents the present predicament and professional, economic and legal plight of almost all contemporary artists living in the western provinces.

All artists experience intolerable income and employment conditions at the present time. Income is

exceedingly irregular; royalties and commissions are totally inadequate; employment is both unstable and uncertain. As a result, it is the rare exception where the artist is able to live from his art or pursue his art full time. Most often, he is forced to work in other areas in order to supplement his income and subsidize his artistic activity.

As a fundamental part of this adverse economic syndrome, the delegation made a special point of emphasizing the peculiar income and taxation problems under which many artists are forced to work, particularly in the visual arts and crafts. It was recommended that artists be allowed to average income over a longer period of time due to the nature of their work, commissions or sales. In addition, the delegation further recommended that sales and manufacturing taxes imposed on purchase of materials and sale of final products be reduced to a justifiable level.

## right of representation

The most significant single measure of the low status assigned to the individual artist is his lack of representation on federal, provincial and municipal arts councils, funding agencies and cultural organizations. Where artists lack adequate representation, it is understandable that they will be subjected to severe economic and legal problems and will be seen as insignificant frills in the educational system in particular as well as in society in general.

As a corollary of the desire to work, Canada West emphasized the need for greater exposure of artists' works on a regional, national and international basis. Even where artists prove capable of persevering against incredible odds and economic difficulties, the delegation was emphatic about the fundamental necessity of taking works of art out of artists' attics and studios in order to expose the Canadian public to the high-quality artistic activity of many western Canadian artists. The delegation demanded an immediate investigation into problems encountered by western artists in the production and distribution of their works of art, and recommended that federal and provincial governments increase assistance to artists and develop more effective distribution techniques and channels for circulating works of art within western Canada as well as nationally and internationally.

## experimentation

Artists felt overwhelmingly that they must have the right to experiment as well as the right to fail. In the past, funding for cultural activities has been so deficient that little or no opportunity has been provided for artistic experimentation. This contrasts tremendously with such other professions as engineering, science and medicine where ample opportunities and resources are made available for the fundamental research and experimentation that is essential to advance knowledge in those fields. As creator as well as producer, the artist cannot

always be successful, and it is only through experimentation and honest error that artists contribute to aesthetic and cultural progress. The delegation recommended that governments, corporations and foundations recognize the artist's right to experiment as well as his right to fail and make the necessary funds and resources available for these purposes.

## decentralization

As a basic principle of cultural activity, the delegation underlined the fact that although creativity may eventually receive national or international recognition, all artistic creation must commence in a specific location. As a result, the delegation emphasized the grassroots and local nature of artistic activity and creativity and demanded that all cultural planning and decision-making be consistent with the basic fact of cultural life.

As an indication of the lack of participation in national cultural decision-making, the delegation at Canada West cited the nature of cultural programmes and location of major cultural facilities as two of the most significant examples of their concern. Most of Canada's major arts centres and training facilities are located in either Toronto, Montreal or Ottawa. In addition, artists tend to be attracted by these facilities and many western Canadian artists felt that the federal government was conspiring with Ontario and Quebec to make Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal the cultural capitals of Canada at the expense of the rest of the country. This dominance by Ontario and Quebec in terms of facilities is complemented by the fact that most cultural programmes are made in these centres and do not reflect interesting cultural developments in western Canada.

Within the western region, concern about decentralization of decision-making power, programmes, facilities and funding was carried even further. Greatly increased touring of national, provincial and community cultural organizations and artists is required in order to bring the arts closer to people in smaller urban centres and rural areas lack even the basic cultural resources that are necessary for a healthy and vigorous cultural life. Few arts educational programmes and opportunities are available and the lack of adequate community cultural facilities often precludes the possibility of visits by outside artistic groups. Since there is little or no opportunity for work in the arts, these communities are seldom visited by creative, performing or exhibiting artists.

The delegation emphasized the fundamental need to bring about enhanced communication between artists and the general public. It was felt that far too often aristocratic elites and interpreters of the arts stand between the essential dialogue and interaction that is necessary between artists and audiences and that these elites and interpreters do great injury to creativity in the arts. In addition, vast geographic distances and lack of financial

resources prevent effective communication among artists and act as a major bottleneck to future cultural development. These geographic and financial problems must be overcome without delay. The delegation therefore recommended that more arts conferences similar to Canada West be held to enable artists to get together to discuss common perceptions and problems.

The delegation expressed its consternation over the dearth of specific information and specialized research material concerning all aspects of cultural activity in western Canada. Virtually nothing is known about the nature and composition of cultural audiences, the social, economic and legal problems of artists, the use of cultural facilities, lobbying procedures and practices in the arts, available touring programmes and cultural exchange opportunities within the region and across the country. It was recommended that federal and provincial governments initiate studies in this area or commission qualified researchers to undertake these studies and publish and distribute the findings.

Canada West was quick to point out that funding for cultural activities in both relative and absolute terms has been in the past and continues to be in the present nothing short of disgraceful. In absolute terms, the level of funding available from public and private sources severely impedes general cultural progress and severely restricts cultural opportunities to a small cultural elite. In relative terms, cultural funding continues to represent a negligible proportion of the total expenditure by federal, provincial and municipal governments, corporations, foundations and private donations.

## democratization

At the present time, not only is the level of financial support for cultural purposes inadequate, but there is little coordination among the agencies

and institutions providing that support. Within the federal and provincial governments, often many departments and agencies provide small amounts of assistance but great confusion exists within the cultural community concerning what funds will be available from what agencies and for what purposes. In addition, the delegation emphasized the lack of coordination between federal and provincial cultural agencies, which tends to result in either a system of double granting or a dual rejection of applications from artists for different reasons. In this area, conference recommendations ranged all the way from improvement in the coordination of grant-giving activities to the establishment of single administrative agencies such as ministries of culture or arts councils which could authorize all funds for cultural purposes from a single and known source.

The delegation was equally emphatic about the inadequacy of funding patterns. In particular, it was recommended that more funds must be

provided for individual creative, performing and exhibiting artists, smaller arts organizations, innovative and experimental projects, touring and cultural exchanges as well as for administrative, organizational, developmental and promotional purposes. In addition, since smaller communities, suburbs and rural areas seem to be continually shortchanged, it was recommended that more funds be made available to these areas and that some of these funds should be made available on a matching basis.

At the present time, cultural activities in the western regional exist in esoteric places and aristocratic spaces. It was the feeling of Canada West that much greater democratization of cultural opportunities was necessary and that the arts should be made more accessible in educational institutions and in public places such as civic centres and shopping plazas. Many delegates felt the need to get away from the aristocratic monuments of the past and establish creative cultural centres and storefront cultural facilities which could be of greater interest to the general public.

## education

Consistent reference was made throughout Canada West to the deplorable state of arts education in the schools. In no other place is the lack of interest and concern about the arts more conspicuous than in the educational system. What is required is nothing short of a massive transformation of educational courses and programmes in the arts so that in the future the arts will occupy a central position in educational development rather than the peripheral position they have occupied in the past. Regardless of whether arts education focuses on the general problem of developing responsive and discriminating audiences in the arts or on training specialized artistic performers and creators, a sufficient education in the arts and effective exposure to the arts is a major prerequisite for all future cultural development.

Canada West recommended a much higher priority for arts education courses and programmes in all elementary and secondary schools and all colleges and universities throughout the west. At the basis of this recommendation was their concern about the need to effectively train specialized teachers in the arts. Since there are far too few specialized and qualified arts teachers and training programmes for these teachers are often deficient and ineffectual, Canada West further recommended that specialized training programmes should be established to prepare and produce qualified arts teachers and that only through the implementation of this recommendation could a higher priority be attached to the arts in the general educational system.

In addition to more exposure to better qualified arts teachers, it is the right of every student in the educational system to be exposed to high-quality artistic performances and exhibitions