

Unlocking the vault

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IN THE FIVE years since its formation was announced by then-Secretary of State Gérard Pelletier, the Canada Council's Art Bank has spent \$5 million purchasing works by Canadian artists. As of August, 1976, its holdings comprised a total of 6,752 paintings, prints, sculptures and photographs selected from the production of 650 artists — by far the largest collection of contemporary Canadian art in existence.

Although the Bank does an increasing amount of business renting art to government offices, most of the collection, especially the more "daring" items, is permanently warehoused in Ottawa. This quasi-seclusion of the works has been the object of a great deal of criticism but it was of course a highly politic — and political — factor in the federal government's approval of the scheme. As Dale McConathy once noted in *Articana*: "It seems likely that the purchase of art, rather than the subsidy of art, sounded the right chord in the Canadian collective consciousness. Perhaps, 'Bank' had a nicer ring than 'museum'."

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Paterson Ewen's *Forked Lightning* 1971