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What public art museums are for when the ground shifts

Museums are among the few civic places designed to sustain shared attention and contested memory in public.



Public art museums protect the symbolic commons and hold time against speed, writes Zainub Verjee. The Hill Times photograph by Sam Garcia

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In the world “as it is”—as Prime Minister Mark Carney put it—public museums stop being amenities and become civic equipment when the ground shifts. Not because they deter armies or rewrite trade regimes, but because sovereignty depends on what they help preserve: a people’s capacity to recognize itself in public.

Sovereignty is usually discussed as a hard thing: borders, courts, police, central banks. Yet, those instruments rely on a softer underside that policy language often avoids naming: narrative, legitimacy, shared memory, and the public’s ability to agree on what happened and what counts as real. When that underside is captured, the hard instruments can remain intact while a society’s self authorship thins out.

Public museums sit on that fault line because they authorize visibility. To collect, conserve, and exhibit is to certify. This belongs to the public record. This is worth keeping. This will outlast the moment. In stable periods, that authority can look like cultural housekeeping. In contested periods, it becomes contested power.



This is why neutrality fails precisely when it is most advertised. In pressured times, neutrality can slide into deference to whoever can punish an institution most effectively, whether through funding threats, reputational campaigns, political retaliation, or access. It becomes alignment with leverage, recast as professionalism. A public museum's obligation is not neutrality. It is accountability to scholarship, to the public, and to the difficult realities that the word "public" contains.

So what are public art museums for when the ground shifts?

First, they protect the symbolic commons. A museum is one of the few places where shared objects and shared stories can exist without being instantly monetized or turned into factional trophies. It holds long memory, inconvenient evidence, and the permission to say the past

is not finished with the present. When anxiety rises, the symbolic commons is often the first thing powerful actors try to capture because controlling memory is an efficient route to legitimacy.

Second, museums hold time against speed. The feed turns public life into a tempo of instant interpretation: outrage, alignment, forgetting. Museums are among the last public technologies designed for duration: slow looking, return, reconsideration. That slowness is democratic habit, the ability to let complexity exist long enough for thought to form.

Third, museums make the politics of visibility visible. Every museum decides what enters the frame and what stays outside it. Whose histories are art, whose are artifact, whose are folk, whose are minor. In unsettled times, these become contests over belonging. Museums matter because they can refuse two corruptions at once: erasure, where uncomfortable histories are pushed out; and instrumentalization, where marginalized histories are displayed as institutional virtue while being stripped of political consequence.



Fourth, museums are rehearsal spaces for pluralism. Democracy is the practice of cohabitation with people you did not choose. When the ground shifts, that practice becomes brittle. Camps harden, suspicion deepens, institutions retreat into risk aversion and call it stability. Museums can narrow the public sphere by treating discomfort as failure, or they can expand it by staging argument with structure and interpretation that dignifies doubt.

Finally, public museums must defend meaning from governance by wealth. The art historian Nizan Shaked argues in *Museums and Wealth* that non-profit museums often present themselves as public while being governed through private wealth and its priorities, and that reform requires structural redistribution, not only better language and programming. The pressure point is decision power: who can veto, who defines "risk," who gets to decide what is "too political" to collect or show.

If a museum cannot safeguard curatorial and scholarly judgment from reputational management and donor comfort, it will still be political. It will simply be political in the most predictable way, reproducing the power that funds it, then calling the result neutrality.

Canada likes to imagine its cultural institutions as polite and unthreatening. But in a moment when the public sphere is being compressed from multiple directions, museums are not peripheral. They are among the few civic places designed to sustain shared attention and contested memory in public.

The test is simple and severe. Can a public museum withstand pressure without recasting censorship as risk, or deference as neutrality? In the world "as it is," that is what public museums are for.

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