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# Setting the Stage: A New Series on the Public Value of Arts and Culture in Canada

By Sandy Houston

The Metcalf Foundation is a long-term supporter of the performing arts, so when the editors of *The Philanthropist* broached the idea of having us curate a series of articles on arts and culture philanthropy in Canada, I was immediately intrigued. The clincher, however, was when I realized that *The Philanthropist* — through its long and distinguished history — has never focused specifically on arts and culture. Although this fact surprised me, it probably shouldn't have. While there is considerable philanthropic support for arts and culture in Canada, it doesn't attract the resources or the sustained attention that other areas do.

The Metcalf Foundation focuses on three key areas — the environment, poverty reduction, and the performing arts. Like many private foundations, the areas in which we work emerged originally from the passions of the family behind the endowment. Our involvement in the arts has always stemmed from a deep conviction about the value of engaging with art at both the individual and the community levels. But unlike our work on environmental and poverty reduction issues, the philanthropic case for the arts has always been more challenging to articulate.

Metcalf's arts funding has been almost entirely focused on the professional performing arts: music, dance, theatre, and opera, and largely within the confines of Southern Ontario. Our program has two main streams. One is focused on augmenting the resilience and vitality of arts organizations by providing sustained opportunities for experimentation, risk, and learning. The other is centred on people and supports individual transitions and training through an internship program. Recently, our arts program has also linked, more explicitly, to many of the larger issues which absorb the Foundation's attention: access, equity, inclusion, diversity, and the perennial need to create room for new thinking and practice.

Our long engagement with arts organizations has provoked a number of observations and questions over the years. These have been driven, in part, by our awareness that there is a relative lack of private philanthropic resources and capacity to address the significance and the complexity of how the arts support community and create public value. In our other two areas of focus we are accustomed to being in the company of other funders — colleagues who bring a rich variety of resources, perspectives, and priorities to our shared interests. The cumulative effect of this aggregation is often increased capacity

and flexibility for both organizations and the sector to respond powerfully to changing circumstances and challenges.

This has not been our experience in the arts realm. There are relatively few foundations working within arts and culture. Why this is, is not clear. It may be because the arts do not present as compelling a case for support, on the level of basic human needs, as health or poverty. Or perhaps cultural activity is seen as a “nice to have” or embodying elite or exclusive attitudes and behaviours.

The arts provoke, challenge, and stimulate emotions and empathy. In some ways, we at Metcalf exemplify or hold within us some of the tensions in the debate about the significance of the arts for funders. We are, in tandem, maintainers of the status quo while also working to amplify the range of perspectives and the potential for disruption in both form and content.

With this series, we welcome the opportunity to highlight the current state of the field, to animate some of the pressing questions it is facing, and to illuminate the impacts and the benefits that flow from arts and culture.

### **Making the case: intrinsic or instrumental?**

In an increasingly individualized and multi-faceted world, questions about the shared public value of the arts remain as scrutinized and as challenging as ever. They spur discussions that are often polarizing and binary. These include debates as to whether policy and resources should favour private or public interests, elite or popular art forms, professional productions or amateur expressions, and the primacy of the western canon, to name but a few.

One of the more contentious issues is whether the value of artistic expression lies in its intrinsic qualities — meaning integral to the individual or subjective experience. Or is the value instrumental, in which case the ability of the arts to achieve corollary social purposes, such as economic benefits or social cohesion, justifies its importance?

Much energy in the last few decades has been given to making the instrumental case, which in the crudest terms is to argue that support for the arts is ultimately about better outcomes such as higher test scores and more productive workers. There are several ways of framing the instrumental contributions of arts and culture. These include the effect they have on our cities, our economies, and the well-being of our citizens. And if the emphasis is on cities and economies, is it about communities and neighbourhoods, engaged citizens, or something more quantifiable and measurable?

Demonstrating and measuring these types of outcomes can be elusive. And perhaps more importantly, to attempt to do so raises the danger of taking away some of the elemental and most compelling aspects of creativity and culture. As a recent report from the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council put it, “it is imperative to reposition first-hand individual experience of arts and culture at the heart of the inquiry into cultural value” (Crossick and Kaszynska, 2016, p. 7).

The report argues that, beyond the importance of individual experiences of reflectiveness, empathy, and imagination, these intrinsic experiences are often the seed for instrumental impacts associated with arts and culture. “... perhaps not economic impact but rather the capacity to be economically innovative and creative; perhaps not urban regeneration driven by large new cultural buildings but rather the way small-scale arts assets and activities might help communities and neighbourhoods; and for health not just

clinical arts therapies but also the link between arts engagement and supporting recovery from physical and mental illness” (ibid).

Encouragingly, there is evidence of an increased understanding that the role of arts and culture needn't be so binary. An interesting movement is emerging among funders, which is conceptualizing the arts as an essential aspect of the “wellbeing of communities” (Szántó, 2010). The arts and culture become not a means to an end nor an end in itself, but rather an essential and desired aspect of our social goals.

### **The new realities of Canada's arts and culture sector**

Canadian's appetite for culture remains strong. Recent data from Culture Track commissioned by Business / Arts shows that Canadians seek out and prize cultural experiences, while the range of what constitutes these experiences has broadened significantly. Both the creation and consumption of art is becoming democratized, and the delineation between creators of art and consumers of art is blurring.

It is worth noting that we have not had a major national examination of arts and cultural policy since the Massey Commission almost 70 years ago. Given the centrality of issues such as cultural expression, voice, inclusion, diversity, and reconciliation, coupled with a rapidly changing landscape, this seems like a significant omission. The ongoing role and responsibility of the arts and creative activities and their contributions to Canada is a topic worthy of sustained consideration and examination.

The timeliness of such an exercise is only underscored when we consider the challenges facing cultural organizations. Some of these are enduring while others are of more recent vintage. Technology is fundamentally altering the way in which all of us consume, experience, and engage with art. The ubiquity, variety, accessibility, and sheer quantity of digital material has profound consequences for live art.

Closely related to this is the changing nature of audiences. Traditionally, the performing arts have been rooted in the mutually reinforcing relationship between creator, performer, and audience. The structures and revenues of arts organizations have been premised around enduring bonds of predictability, loyalty, and commitment from audiences who are devotees of particular companies, artists, and art forms.

As patterns change and audiences seek different, more convenient, frequently less predictable, and more idiosyncratic relationships with art forms and experiences, the challenges for arts companies magnify. The chronic insufficiency of resources never seems to change. If anything, there are more organizations and artists chasing less money. The implications of this influence everything from the precarity of employment for arts workers, to the inadequacy of rehearsal times and performance space, strained marketing budgets, and reduced touring opportunities.

The hurdles inherent in our valuation frameworks present an additional challenge related to funding and investing. The current vogue is for evaluation frameworks premised on impact. It can be difficult for arts organizations to fully account for the effects of their work in this fashion. This difficulty has implications not just within the traditional grant frameworks, but also for the arts' ability to participate in the growing field of social finance, which is largely built around impact metrics.

Compounding these enduring challenges are newer ones that reflect the changing nature of our country. We are a far more diverse society than we were when many of our cultural institutions were created. Arguably, the structures and priorities of our cultural systems do not adequately reflect or enable the

many diverse creative communities seeking opportunities for expression, access, and growth. This observation has particular application to our Indigenous communities and our collective ongoing process of decolonialization.

Organizations and funders alike are struggling to find the appropriate path into pressing issues of representation, inclusion, diversity, gender, and reconciliation in a way that both reflects and redresses present realities while sustaining and augmenting existing organizations. No doubt these broader frameworks create more room for a more diverse group of funders to engage in new approaches and models.

### **The series: what we'll explore**

The arts and culture sector is made up of extraordinary people. We are constantly struck by their vision, tenacity, and commitment to constantly push, test, and provoke. Their willingness to re-examine and reinvent their relationships with community, audience, revenue, and even their art itself is exceptional and driven by a profound need to make, express, and connect. This is why we are honoured to be able to include the voices and perspectives of a variety of artists and arts leaders in this series.

The next article in the series will provide an analysis of how arts and culture is currently funded in Canada. The author will draw comparisons to the US and European approaches, predominantly philanthropic and state-funded, respectively. Next up, you will hear from a group of five artists who will speak about the value that their art brings to their communities. These artists will write about how they use their artistic visions to address the needs of today's audiences.

The series will also include a video piece in which artists and administrators will share how philanthropy has helped them realize their visions, as well as ideas about how it can bolster better cultural engagement in Canada. Another piece will explore the issues that are shaping and defining the future of arts and culture in Canada, including decolonization, equity, newcomer realities, the individual artist, the digital imperative, and new patterns of public cultural consumption. We will conclude the series with a reflection from Metcalf.

We hope these contributions will do a few things. First, help illuminate the potency and variety of arts and culture contributions to Canada. Second, help us identify if there are forms of investment in arts and culture that philanthropy has not taken and new ways that philanthropy can partner with arts organizations to address shifting patterns within the country. And lastly, stimulate an increased collective appetite to take up some of these pressing questions.

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