



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

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Indigenous Arts Protocols

Indigenous arts protocols vary from nation to nation. They are based on principles of responsibility and guide artistic practices to ensure respect for Indigenous Peoples and their knowledges.

Bear Witness, Tribe Called Red

Cultural appropriation is something that the Indigenous community is dealing with constantly at the moment, you know it seems to be a never ending stream of misuse and appropriation and misrepresentation of our culture.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Author and musician

We're very much positioned as something that can be extracted or taken within this settler, colonial system. Our artistic practices and our cultural practices are also sort of seen as there for the taking.

Lee Maracle, Poet and author

Our art comes from the land and goes back to it. Now, if you have an overblown sense of entitlement and think everything belongs to you, then you are going to be taught to exploit what belongs to you as opposed to let the land teach you.

France Trépanier, Artist and curator

For many years or decades, centuries; people, researchers, anthropologists, ethnographers went into Aboriginal communities and took. They took the knowledge, they took the objects, they took the ideas, they took the medicine, they took everything and then they left. We're faced with institutions that are very powerful and that are so convinced that they are right all the time. And they are so convinced using the logic of the Western art world that they are on the top of the pyramid and that their knowledge is universal.



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John Hupfield, Filmmaker and designer

It constantly comes up with in fashion, or clothing, or even in our media where something looks cool like a head dress and without any context or understanding of why that is important.

Sara Roque, Ontario Arts Council

It is critical in the process to address protocols and why it's critical is because we have endured so much appropriation and with that appropriation and misrepresentation over the years and particularly through the arts and cultural institutions. Ultimately, for one not to engage in that process, the worst case scenario is you're actively contributing to the degradation of a people and of cultures of this land.

WHAT ARE PROTOCOLS?

France Trépanier

Protocols are not static things, they are not things of the past either. I think they're profoundly rooted in Indigenous knowledge. They are profoundly rooted in the understanding of what the world is.

Ryan Rice, OCAD Indigenous Visual Culture Program

That knowledge is critical to maintaining our distinction and maintaining our nationhood.

Sara Roque

As Indigenous peoples we have across Turtle Island, we all have protocols that we have always engaged in nation to nation.

Ryan Rice

I often go back to the *guswanta*, the two row wampum, which is a moral code of how we should conduct ourselves.



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HONOURING PROTOCOLS

France Trépanier

For me protocols are about presence and reverence. Because I think they carry the depth of the meaning behind protocols.

Bear Witness

If you do want to explore things you know that aren't your own that don't come from yourself. Then listening is the most important thing. That you find somebody who can teach you how to respect and how to do things right.

Jason Ryle, Imagine NATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival

There can be a very strong disconnect between what the artist wants to do and really kind of what is the right thing to do. And sometimes people feel that might be an issue of censorship. Sometimes that people might feel that it's a non-artistic infringement onto their artistic process. And I do think it's a different time. I think we are in a time right now where we actually need to be proactive.

Nyla Innuksuk, Filmmaker

It's important definitely to have some guidelines in place because there's a very fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation. So it's just a good idea to know where that line is drawn.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Jason Ryle

So much of it comes back to acknowledgement. So it's acknowledgement that there's a way to approach this type of work even if there isn't a right way or singular way.



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France Trépanier

Because if you want to engage with Indigenous communities then I think that you have to work on their terms. And I think that you have to be guided by Indigenous principles in doing that work. So principles of respect, principles of relevance, of responsibility, of relationality, and then reciprocity.

Bear Witness

Respecting protocols is a way of learning how to respect everything around you, y'know not just culture but everything. If you have a respect to treat somebody's culture, somebody's songs, somebody's dance anything with a reverence you know than you're going to look at the rest of the world like that too.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

And so if you don't have relationships with Elders, storytellers and Indigenous communities then I don't know how you can ethically tell Indigenous stories. Before you ask for a contribution that they understand how that contribution is going to be used and you have their permission and consent to do so.

France Trépanier

We go into communities to bring something and then to take. It cannot just be a one-way street. It has to be that you are receiving something but you're bringing something. And at the end of the day the community has benefited from what you've been doing. Not just you, not just your career, not just your show, not just your artwork.

Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

And a lot of times I think that in the academy and the arts, our practice of reciprocity is not balanced. So we'll maybe give something back to the Elder but it's not in proportion to what the Elder gave us. And so I think now a lot about proportionality.



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RESPONSIBILITY

France Trépanier

And as a curator, in my practice I use protocols as a way of first taking care of the people. I see it as my responsibility, in my curatorial work, to first take care of the people. I use it also as a way of taking care of the space and finally it's also a way of taking care of the idea that we are exploring.

Bear Witness

Indigenous cultural protocols play a big part in our work. It was one of the first questions we had to ask ourselves in A Tribe Called Red when we decided to start remixing powwow music was: What does this mean? What does it entail as far as getting permission for these songs, y'know? There's a huge responsibility that comes with being connected to those things. That's something that we had to address for ourselves right away. Y'know, if we were going to use our culture in our music, in our art form, essentially as what we were going to show the world that our responsibility to our community and to the greater Indigenous community, was massive.

AN ONGOING PROCESS

Ryan Rice

I think it's important that the idea of protocols and the practice of protocols don't become rigid and a measurement of how we conduct ourselves. I think it's a more organic form of knowledge that surfaces and we have to be relatively sincere on how we are respectful.

Lee Maracle

I always want to caution people that make sure that you're not oppressing others with the protocols. They are to include people. Not to keep each other out.



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Leanne Betasamosake Simpson

To me, protocols are an ethical, an on-going ethical process.

ENRICHING ARTS PRACTICES

Ryan Rice

I think by moving forward with mutual understanding and relationships protocols, traditional knowledge and our contemporary practices will benefit everyone in many ways because it gives a distinct identity within the nation. It's a form of nation building within our own nations and within a larger collective of Indigenous, Indigeneity across a global stage.

Nyla Innuksuk

Y'know Indigenous people they want to share what they have so if you ask questions and you have a willingness to learn they will understand that and they'll want to share with you their culture.

CREDITS

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The Ontario Arts Council recognizes the diversity and distinct histories of Indigenous peoples in Ontario.

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Bear Witness



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Leanne Betasamosake Simpson
Lee Maracle
France Trépanier
John Hupfield
Sara Roque
Ryan Rice
Jason Ryle
Nyla Innuksuk

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