

## Art matters

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The visual arts is a billion-dollar business that affects the lives of 7.5 million Canadians. Yet it has not been mentioned by politicians during the federal election campaign, says the head of the AGO, A father and his young daughter were walking through the Art Gallery of Ontario recently, talking companionably about the Thomson collection. "Cool," she said. "Look at that. Look at how incredible that is."

This is why I come to work each morning.

This is why more than a half-million people visit the AGO each year and 20 million visit all of Canada's art galleries and museums annually. It's why Canadians spent half a billion dollars on artwork last year. Art speaks to people. This is why art matters.

In Toronto, Canada's most culturally diverse city, art is particularly important because it helps to bridge the differences between us.

Within the cultural mosaic that is this city and this country, art helps us understand our world in new ways. It takes us out of our everyday life, traditions and conventions. It invites us, sometimes forces us, out of our familiar world and prompts us to ask questions. "What does that mean? Why does she use that image? Why is the snow blue and not white? What makes me connect to his painting?"

When we ask these questions of ourselves and of each other, we're beginning to find a shared artistic language. Suddenly our world becomes bigger.

For example, in the AGO's current exhibition, Turner Whistler Monet Impressionist Visions, we see hauntingly beautiful interpretations of environmental degradation wrought by the Industrial Revolution. How is the environment represented today? What is our own form of salvation as we face the difficult truths of modern life?

Contemporary art - an important focus of the AGO - is at the forefront of a new artistic language. Contemporary artists can be controversial, their work can challenge the very notion of what is (and isn't) art.

Contemporary artists open up something that is new, and yet we celebrate such newness at our peril because the original thinker creates a gap between what we know and what we don't. This uncertainty breeds doubt. The art gallery's role is to create the environment where understanding begins. Artists create, not to communicate with themselves, but to communicate with others and, even then, the artist is not fully in control of all the meanings.

Good art has multiple meanings and a great depth of meaning. The viewer discovers something new with each encounter. The art gallery must encourage this experience.

Creating an environment that encourages this encounter is the vision behind our Transformation AGO project.

Internationally renowned architect Frank Gehry, who as a child had his first stirring experience of art here at the AGO, is creating an expanded cultural landmark in the heart of our city.

His relationship with this project will be like no other in his long and successful career. When the transformed AGO opens we will have created new pathways between the known and the unknown. At its best it will be a cauldron that distills and intensifies the act of reflection, of asking questions, of finding that shared language.

Our galleries and our schools have long understood the value of the arts. Last year, more than 6,000 children and adults took organized art classes at the AGO.

Despite periodic budgetary challenges, the arts steadfastly remain an important component of classroom learning across Canada. In fact, national organizations such as Learning Through the Arts and ArtsSmarts have documented the role of the arts in improved learning. Their studies show that infusing integrative thinking and creativity into the school curriculum yields improved problem solving and communications skills, reduced absenteeism and an overall increase in academic performance.

While the visual arts defy many forms of traditional performance measurement, the Canada Council for the Arts tells us they are a billion-dollar business and directly touch the lives of more than 7.5 million Canadians.

We know they contribute to Canada's "innovation agenda" by celebrating creativity and creating vibrant and revitalized communities that attract the drivers (as well as the passengers) of a knowledge-based economy.

We know this and yet the platforms of our federal political candidates are largely silent on arts and culture.

We need to ensure that current levels of provincial and federal support for the arts are enhanced. We need to remind our elected leaders that Canadians value the visual arts not only as an esthetic experience, but as an integral part of learning, as a force for social cohesion and as a uniquely Canadian celebration of our differences.

At a recent news conference for the opening of the Turner Whistler Monet exhibition, a reporter asked "Can art make cities more gentle?"

Unequivocally yes.

Finding the common threads among us and understanding what sets us apart is a civilizing influence on a world that needs it now more than ever. Every day, art gives voice to that discovery.

Matthew Teitelbaum is director and CEO of The Art Gallery of Ontario.