Towards a National Mandate: Why Canada Needs a National Centre for Sculpture

By the Canadian Centre for Sculpture

Introduction

There are moments in the cultural life of a nation when an absence becomes too significant to overlook. In Canada, sculpture has arrived at such a moment.

For generations, sculpture has existed everywhere and yet has rarely been brought together within a coherent national framework. It inhabits public squares and war memorials, university campuses and church interiors, museum collections and civic façades. It lives in Indigenous carving traditions whose histories extend far beyond Confederation, and in the studios of artists whose works continue to shape how Canadians encounter memory, identity, and public life in three dimensions.^1 Yet despite this breadth and depth, sculpture has often been institutionally overshadowed by adjacent disciplines such as painting, architecture, heritage studies, archaeology, or public art.

This paradox lies at the centre of Canada's cultural landscape: sculpture is among the country's oldest and most materially enduring forms of expression, but it remains scattered, inconsistently documented, and too rarely interpreted through a dedicated national lens.^2 The issue is not a lack of important work. Rather, it is the absence of cohesion.

The **Canadian Center for Sculpture (CCS)** emerges from this long-standing gap. Its purpose is both practical and intellectual: to establish a national home for the study, preservation, documentation, and public understanding of sculpture in Canada. The need for such a centre is not abstract. It arises from the very real vulnerability of sculptural works, the dispersal of records, the fragility of oral histories, and the lack of a centralized infrastructure devoted specifically to sculpture as a field.

What follows is an argument for why the CCS should exist now, and why Canada's sculptural heritage deserves a mandate national in scope.

I. Sculpture Before Nation

Any serious account of sculpture in Canada must begin before the nation itself.^3

Long before Confederation, and well before European monumental traditions shaped legislative grounds and civic spaces, this land held rich and highly sophisticated sculptural practices within Indigenous communities. Carving in wood, stone, bone, antler, and clay was never merely a

question of form. These works carried story, ceremony, cosmology, territorial knowledge, kinship, and remembrance. Their meanings were embedded in use, touch, material intelligence, and continuity.

This longer chronology fundamentally changes how sculpture must be understood. Sculpture is not a peripheral branch of visual culture. It is among the deepest material languages through which meaning has been made on this land.

From these foundational practices, one can trace a broad continuum through ecclesiastical carving in New France, funerary monuments, nineteenth-century public memorials, portrait busts, architectural reliefs, modernist public commissions, contemporary installation, and digital sculptural experimentation.^4 Seen in this way, sculpture is not episodic; it is one of the continuous structural threads of Canadian cultural history.

The CCS begins from this premise. It recognizes sculpture not as a secondary category of museum holdings, but as a defining mode of cultural memory whose history stretches across centuries and communities.

II. Canada’s Institutional Blind Spot

The challenge is not that Canada lacks sculpture. The challenge is that sculpture has lacked a dedicated institutional lens.

Important works are dispersed across municipalities, museums, military collections, universities, hospitals, sacred spaces, and private estates. Some are expertly conserved; others remain scarcely catalogued. Architectural sculpture may be altered during redevelopment with little notice beyond the local context. Portrait busts in public institutions often remain undocumented outside internal records. The archives of sculptors themselves are frequently scattered among family papers, institutional correspondence, foundry invoices, photographs, and oral recollections.

This dispersal has produced what may best be described as an institutional blind spot: sculpture is visible everywhere, yet the national picture remains incomplete.

Researchers experience this acutely. Provenance, editions, sitters, commissions, restorations, relocations, and changing public meanings can be difficult to trace. The public encounters the problem differently, often through the quiet disappearance of works from familiar spaces without any clear record of what has been lost.

The CCS answers this blind spot through focus. Its role is not to replace museums or local custodians, but to connect what has too long remained isolated. In doing so, it provides the coherence that sculpture in Canada has historically lacked.

III. Why Stewardship Matters Now

The case for the CCS is made even more urgent by the present moment.

Sculpture is materially vulnerable in ways that are often underestimated. Outdoor works endure freeze-thaw cycles, pollution, salt exposure, moisture ingress, corrosion, structural fatigue, vandalism, and years of deferred maintenance.^5 Architectural reliefs remain especially at risk as buildings are sold, renovated, or demolished. Once removed from their contexts, such works can lose not only physical integrity but also the meanings attached to place.

Equally pressing is the vulnerability of living knowledge. The memories of artists, sitters, commissioners, foundry technicians, conservators, and communities are often the only sources capable of explaining how a work came into being, why certain decisions were made, or how sculpture functioned in public life. These accounts disappear quickly when they are not recorded.

This is why the CCS must exist now.

Its work is not archival in the narrow sense alone. It is an intervention into cultural time. By establishing records, oral histories, conservation frameworks, and public access while these histories are still recoverable, the Centre responds to an urgency that cannot be postponed without consequence.

IV. The CCS Response

The CCS addresses this national need through five interconnected commitments.

1. National stewardship

At its core, the CCS provides a sculpture-specific framework for ethical care and long-term advocacy. This includes conservation guidance, preservation standards, and a national voice capable of drawing attention to sculptural works at risk.

2. The NSRR (National Sculpture Records Registry)

The proposed **National Sculpture Records Registry** serves as the documentary backbone of the Centre.^6 By creating a centralized and expandable record of works relevant to Canada, the NSRR transforms isolated data into a national research infrastructure.

3. Oral Sculpture Histories

Sculpture is never only object-based. It is also relational: shaped by artists, sitters, communities, commissioners, and makers whose voices remain essential to interpretation. The CCS preserves these voices as part of the record itself.

4. Research publications and digital monographs

The Centre's scholarship must remain public-facing. Essays, catalogues, case studies, and digital monographs allow the CCS to establish sculpture as an active intellectual field while making that research accessible beyond specialist audiences.

5. Public education and accessibility

A virtual-first model ensures that sculpture can be encountered nationally, including by communities historically distant from major urban institutions. In this sense, accessibility is not an afterthought but a structural principle of the CCS.

Taken together, these commitments justify the Centre's existence as a form of cultural infrastructure Canada has not previously had.

V. Toward a Living Archive

The deepest promise of the CCS lies in its ability to transform sculpture from a scattered inheritance into a living archive.

A living archive is not passive storage. It is an active, evolving network of records, voices, conservation histories, images, 3D documentation, scholarship, and public interpretation. It preserves not only what sculpture is, but how sculpture continues to shape civic identity, memory, and public imagination.

This future-facing dimension is essential. The Centre must preserve the past while also creating the conditions through which future sculptural practices—digital modelling, 3D scanning, interdisciplinary conservation science, and new forms of public monumentality—can be understood within the same continuum.

The CCS therefore exists at the intersection of preservation and possibility. It safeguards what has survived, recovers what is at risk of disappearing, and creates a framework through which future generations can continue to think with sculpture as part of Canada's cultural life.

Conclusion

Canada needs a National Centre for Sculpture because sculpture has long existed as a foundational cultural form without a national structure devoted specifically to its care and understanding.

The gap is clear: objects are dispersed, records fragmented, oral histories vulnerable, and preservation efforts inconsistent across regions and institutions. The CCS answers this condition with a model that is rigorous, accessible, research-driven, and publicly accountable.^7

Its existence is justified not by ambition alone, but by necessity.

To establish a national home for sculpture is to recognize that Canada's three-dimensional cultural memory deserves a dedicated mandate equal to its depth, complexity, and enduring public significance. The Canadian Center for Sculpture is, in this sense, not simply a new institution. It is the beginning of a long-overdue national framework for sculpture itself.

Notes

1. Ruth B. Phillips, *Trading Identities: The Souvenir in Native North American Art from the Northeast, 1700–1900* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 17–24.
2. Maria Tippett, *Sculpture in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974), 1–12.
3. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin, eds., *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1992), 9–15.
4. John R. Porter, *The Arts in New France* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1983), 55–89; Tippett, *Sculpture in Canada*, 45–78.
5. Ingrid S. Lunden, "Conservation Challenges in Outdoor Bronze Sculpture in Cold Climates," *Journal of the Canadian Association for Conservation* 32 (2007): 41–58.
6. Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 376–82.
7. Compare the institutional logic of the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Phyllis Lambert, "The Canadian Centre for Architecture: A Museum for Architecture," in *CCA: Building, Collection, and Programs* (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1989), 9–21.

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