

Dr. Shirley Thomson on Leadership

Interview by Robert Labossiere

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Dr. Thomson was interviewed as part of an ongoing research project on leadership in the arts. Below is an edited transcript of our conversation.

Interview

Robert Labossiere: Art museum directors tend generally to come through an academic and curatorial path. How did you come to direct the National Gallery of Canada?

Shirley Thomson: I would attribute my interest in art museums to a fascination with the subject matter and seeing the subject matter become three-dimensional rather than on the flat pages of a doctoral dissertation. There's something very active and exciting and stimulating, a Renaissance quality about working on exhibitions. And you say, Oh my God, we've got this in our gallery, with us! Every exhibition is like having a new baby.

But what drove me is I loved art history. I went through a very tumultuous career early on. I hadn't worked much as a curator. That was one of the shocking elements about my appointment; I heard the buzz about that of course. But I had had four years at the McCord as the Director and I wasn't unaware of the implications of curatorial research.

But as you know very well the whole thing about leadership of museums has to do with politics, fundraising and content. And you have to deal very much with the local situation that you are faced with, wherever you are. I don't know if that has changed very much. I suspect it hasn't, that it is "la condition humaine." And at the National Gallery that was especially true, you are open to the Auditor General, to the political parties, to political persuasion, the Deputy Ministers in particular, their power and influence. You better know how to tap dance.

RL: Do you think in retrospect that you have particular character attributes that lent themselves to directing, to leadership?

ST: I think I listened to people, I respected their opinion, and I knew what was going on. I was prepared. I worked like hell. I loved it. It wasn't a chore. It was exciting. But it wasn't 9 to 5, not by a long shot, nor was it Monday to Friday. The weekend would come along and I would think, now I can get some work done.

If you love the material then it's not a burden. The burdens happen when you have irrational political demands from people who do not or refuse to understand the depth of the research. That happened in particular at the Canada Council. And it was an easy shot. There was one controversy: an artist's project involving research on the artist's grandmother's blindness. They asked why would you get a research grant for this.

To us it was obvious; it was a very important comment on language, poetry, the writing of memoirs, etc. But at a certain political level it looked foolish. You have to deal with all of that. Those were the low periods.

RL: I hesitate to ask about Voice of Fire because it's been written about so much, but of all the things you dealt with at the National Gallery was that the biggest crisis?

ST: Yes, I thought there would be no problem because it had already been in the papers in October of '89. And John Bentley Mays had already written about it. And also we thought we should tell the public how their money was being spent. We were a bit naive. So we did that in early '90 because a new board was appointed, that's when the gallery got its own board, in July of 1990. And I think this new board couldn't cope with the public announcement of Voice of Fire. Two colours, three stripes, dead American, all the issues. But we announced it and the timing was bad. We had a plan but we were still under the National Museums Corporation and they had a fit. I had assumed that their advisory council would have more influence. One of them once said to me, "Madam, je vous estime." That is the proper way for a board to operate in terms of difficult works of art. We all know that. You have experts. I was relying on my expert.

I guess we were surprised. It went on for seven weeks. We learned a lot in the process. The whole gallery learned a lot. And we smartened up like hell. Two years later we bought Rothko's No. 16, which provoked one headline, "They've done it again." And we said, "Yes, excellent art, masterpieces, the gallery deserves this." There were other issues. There was the Rothko, but there was also the meat dress by Yana Sterbak of course.

RL: These days the art museums seem to be more publicly oriented, more concerned about attendance and public reception.

ST: The art museums have always been interested in audience. We were doing audience analysis at the McCord. What I think has changed is that there's a pronounced emphasis, there's more and more emphasis on the gallery raising funds than there was previously. There was an assumption that particularly federal institutions were there for the public good. When I was at the National Gallery we were not raising money in my first year but by the end we were raising 15% of the budget. There's a big debate about that. If you talk to the directors of the UK federal institutions, I tell you, if you suggest paying an entrance fee... they believe it's a public good. Neil MacGregor [Director of the British Museum since 2002] would be absolutely apoplectic talking about those issues, but what is it at the Metropolitan, 25 bucks?

RL The skills that are needed to do fundraising, sponsorships, those sorts of activities, are different than the management of a large staff and program and also different from the academic stewardship of what is essentially an intellectual program are they not?

ST: I think as an administrator you have to know what you are administering. I think the greater depth of experience and awareness and critical capacity that one has as a director, the stronger the direction will be. I'm thinking of Henri Loyrette at the Louvre. He's a

fantastic 19th Century scholar, a very distinguished guy, he could be a diplomat, and look what he's doing with the Louvre; he's taken it all over the Middle East. He's smart. He can convince; you have to be able to convince potential donors of the value of the collection. Well, if you are indifferent to the collection and you spin out a bunch of management garble talk, I've seen this, you wouldn't get far with a guy like Ken Thompson, talking junk. And even some of the big CEOs I've talked to about whether we should be doing management courses at Princeton or Harvard; they say, no, if you're going to do anything like that, do it in your specialty.

Of course I think directors need to know budgets, how to read a balance sheet, the weight of budgets. A lot of it you know already. But if you are working on a federal project you have to deal with Public Works so it is more complicated.

RL: When you moved from the National Gallery to Canada Council, how different was that?

ST: I don't think it was. I think it has to do with mental flexibility and interest. It was a hugely exciting job but it was all the disciplines. Man! How could I ever master all that? I went to committee meetings, I listened to juries, I listened to their debates, I weighed the issues. I would get back to the office at 4 o'clock and I'd say, okay I can get four hours work done. I had to navigate with my senses; you had different business plans with each discipline. That's of course where a great staff is important and Canada Council has some fabulous people, you know, the head of theatre, the head of visual arts, the head of media Arts and they were great. I went systematically through the organization, listening to them, wondering about the problems, from time to time holding meetings, asking what's going on what should I know. If I traveled I would always be briefed, who's up, who's out to get us, how do we handle them, throw me dirty questions. I listened to people and I listened to the experts.

RL: I'm also interested in the role institutions play in the arts. Do you think Canada Council plays a leading role in the arts, or is it more of a following role, following artists and the community?

ST: Well, Canada Council plays a leading role in that it funds artists who are damn good. I'm pretty sure you would find a Canada Council grant behind every great artist in this country. But I don't think you'd want an administrator to be an artist. You want a kind of infrastructure that is solid and resilient at the same time because the artists are going to raise hell. And they better know that there's a sympathetic infrastructure there.

RL: In the course of this research I had the opportunity a short while ago to interview Robert Sirman [Director of the Canada Council for the Arts] and he said that it's the artists who are leading.

ST: Of course it is the artists who are leading. That's why it's so important to get more money into the Canada Council.

RL: In the research literature on leadership, a distinction is made between two kinds of leadership, managerial leadership and entrepreneurial leadership, the former being more about keeping an existing program running and the latter being more about getting new things done.

ST: I would say that your definition of management would drive me bonkers with boredom for God's sakes! What is the point of working in an institution where things are going smoothly? What you do is you see what's going on and you push it further, always. Yes, try new things. I don't see there's a division between management and the entrepreneur. You have to be a good manager. I don't mind going to business courses, particularly in areas where I'm weak, for example I'm not that good with numbers.

RL: You've directed the National Gallery of Canada and the Canada Council for the Arts but you're also working with UNESCO and other international agencies. What has that been like for you? Is it different in kind?

ST: Not really, there's excitement in the content, originally it was the content that attracted me. What's not to like?! But from a management point of view, you have to watch the development of bureaucracy. Bureaucracy can kill you. I wonder how they let me keep at it the way I'm talking about it now. It's a management issue because you can set up systems and people are following through, they are following the rules but they may be completely failing the issues. There's always a danger of too many systems that lead to paralysis, either paralysis or a certain level of comfort that precludes original thinking.

RL Today there's a lot of talk about sustainability in the arts, as in other sectors. The idea comes from the environment, the idea that you can have a system that doesn't require continuous energy input that is self-sustaining. Do you think that is applicable to the arts, or achievable?

ST: I think the arts need money at all times. The arts are artifice, like pieces of steel bent into a shape. Look at chair made of carbon fibre. That's artifice! That's distortion! So I wouldn't worry about that.

RL: But people are using this language to fashion an argument for the arts, that they can be sustainable, but where it gets difficult is when this idea basically is being used to mean less government dependence.

ST: My reaction is the arts should be more government dependent because the arts are part of human fulfillment, and a part we neglect, particularly in North America, particularly in Canada where we don't have the comparable private funding that our American colleagues have. I was involved in the Association of Art Museum Directors for many years. They hold one of their two annual meetings in the southern US and we would have tours of private collections, in Texas, South Carolina, Louisiana, California, all Republicans, and I can tell you, those supposedly narrow-minded conservative types buy great works of art. Of course there's a lot of trouble down there now, but until that

happened the money was flowing, which we haven't had here, but I certainly think our governments can be more generous.

RL: Is it either/or, the greater government support is, the less private support will be?

ST: I don't think so. In the US, you have the National Endowment for the Arts and the state councils, then you have private support. I don't know the statistics but you can also have problems if private support dominates. You know the stories: a collector who builds a museum, who then withdraws his collection over some disagreement then comes back with his own director and says you have to have this person. In governance terms that's a major no no. Overall, I think flexibility is really the key.

RL: There certainly are changes in the air, in the economy. But we also see that some directors are coming from slightly different career paths today. For example, we have more directors who have done formal leadership training.

ST: There's nothing wrong with that; there is nothing wrong with a good, solid-trained mind, absolutely nothing wrong with that, but you also have to have a passion for your mandate. Perhaps that's just me. Sure, you can be cool, but you don't find that in many of the guys in the larger institutions.

RL: One of the premises I had at the beginning of this research project was a question whether one of the things that holds the arts back is a certain ambivalence about leadership, a reluctance to talk about it and a skepticism about its importance.

ST: Yes, I think you could work on that. Part of it is an old 19th C idea, "Be good sweet child and let who will be clever..." or "Don't sully my hands with the vulgarity of numbers," but I think that's changed. It might flow from our colonial past where you could be a distinguished scholar but never sweep the floor, and part of it may be male domination as well, and the proper way of doing things without necessarily debating what the issues are. I think flexibility is the key. You have to consider the Canadian context too, how much that is going to change. I think it's going to change a lot, with new Canadians especially. Wherever they come from, they are going to shake things up. They move! And that may well change attitudes.

The interview took place at the Ottawa home of Dr. Shirley Thomson on April 20th, 2010. The interview was conducted by Robert Labossiere, who is the Executive Director of the Canadian Art Museum Directors Organization. Kathleen Donaldson provided editorial assistance in the preparation of this transcript. Other interviews in the series include Simon Brault, Director of the National Theatre School and Robert Sirman, CEO of the Canada Council for the Arts.