

Celebrating 150 years of Women in the Arts in Canada in Silver: The Back Story

By Laura Brandon

Imagine, for a moment, the world of lamplight under which our forebears read, talked, painted, sewed, ate, and wrote. Perhaps, as evening closed in, they poured tea into a cup from a silver teapot and idly stirred in sugar with a favourite silver tea-spoon. Dance, music, literature, drama, and a host of other arts were a rich part of that flickering realm when Canada began 150 years ago. In that world of light and shadow, women created and nurtured the rich cultural mosaic that we enjoy today.



Lumigado by Kye Yeon Son,
Celebrating achievements of
exceptional female authors

Antique Sterling Silver candlestick, Steel, Sterling Silver, Stainless Steel



'Illuminating!' is a new art installation inspired by that historic world, both materially and intellectually. Comprising 15 contemporary Canadian silver sticks and lamp holders, the work celebrates 150 years of women in the arts in Canada. The artworks included in this installation have been made by some of the finest craftspeople working in metal in Canada today. This article recounts the personal story that inspired the installation.



The author's great-grandmother Elizabeth Hay Turnbull and grandmother Constance Mary (Turnbull) Greey, in Banff, 30 June 1910. Metalsmith Anne Barros has incorporated this image into her candleholder, which responds to the theme of photography. See p.78

It was on these important days that they told me where I came from in Canada, who had owned what and where, and who had made it. The names of shops specializing in silver, like Ryrie and Birks, that were imprinted on the pieces – meaningless in England – evoked visions of a vanished upper-middle-class Toronto environment, with roots that went back to the 18th Century. Like my mother and aunt, I learned about my ancestors from the objects that they used and kept. They included Robert Hay of Jacques

It was a journey that began with history, silver and enthusiasm, and a profound concern for the place of women in the Confederation story. Critical to the saga are the six generations of Canadian women who originally purchased, and cared for, the silver that forms the core of the 15 artworks. I am the sixth generation.

The project began after my mother died in 2009, followed a year later by the death of her older sister. The two women were Canadian but had lived in England for most of their lives. Their mother had died when they were five and seven years old, and their father five years later. Their maternal uncles and grandparents then followed soon after. So in 1938, with no immediate family, both women – now in their early twenties – moved to England.

They took with them to England the material possessions that had mattered to the families they barely knew, and treasured them for the rest of their long lives. These objects were now their family; tangibly connecting them to the relatives they had lost. Even if they did not use the silver teapots, serving dishes, and finely decorated cutlery a great deal, they found comfort in knowing it was in drawers, cupboards, and on shelves, ready to be brought out on special occasions.



Typical late 19th century interior, Hay furniture

and Hay furniture manufacturers, and William and John Greey, who made milling equipment. If these men's origins were humble, the silver their wives put on the table manifest their proud rise in the social ranks.

After my mother and aunt's deaths, half of the total six generations worth of family silver came to me. I treated it with great respect and kept it clean and polished, but slowly I realized that I was never going to use it. The world has changed, and silver tea services no longer represent success and social status, but a rapidly shrinking, stratified, if not exploitative society. In the age of IKEA, I knew that the silver was not going to be used by my children and their families. So what to do?

A series of discoveries inspired me following my 2015 retirement from the Canadian War Museum where I was the curator of war art for 22 years. First, was realizing that the 150th Anniversary of Confederation was happening in 2017. Having spent 14 years on Prince Edward Island, I knew that Confederation was a distinctly male success story featuring the Fathers of Confederation. I also knew that April 2017 marked the 100th Anniversary of the Battle of Vimy Ridge, another male achievement. I began to be concerned. Would women be relegated to mere bystanders in a celebration focused on these two male nation-building events? I found a potential solution in my third inspiration: I saw, for the first time, Judy Chicago's monumental *The Dinner Party* on a visit to the Brooklyn Museum. The artist had employed craftswomen to create dinner settings for the great women in history, essentially inviting them to dine together at a massive triangular table.

My mother was an important fourth inspiration. She had received training as a painter and sculptor, and for a number of years practiced as a potter. She was keenly attuned to modern international design, but we had



Beth Alber's contribution to the "Illuminating" project, celebrating women's achievements in architecture

Bird eye's view and detail



little money, so she satisfied her interest in well-designed items with minor purchases, which we were taught to value. From a young age I was educated to appreciate craft, perhaps more so even than art.

And there was even a fifth inspiration: my aunt's genuine commitment to the arts. She left the bulk of her estate to the Association of British Orchestras simply because music had been an important mainstay all her life. Even though she could play the piano and guitar, she preferred to listen to music. She also loved painting, and was an accomplished water colorist but, similarly, she preferred to look rather than paint.

One day, I knew what I had to do. I would seek out craftspeople who worked with silver to create objects of beauty out of the historic silver I had inherited. They would transform it into contemporary designs that would celebrate women in the arts in the Confederation period. In undertaking this, I would honour the five generations of women who had looked after the silver before me, by finding a new use for it and in so doing also recognize the interests that I knew my aunt and mother shared. More importantly, I would be able to start a conversation about women and Confederation.

Initially I did not know what these pieces would look like, but eventually I settled on candlesticks or lamp holders, because they shed light on the past, and illuminate the future. Significantly, I also hoped these pieces would end up somewhere like Rideau Hall, where, at the national and international levels, they might inspire discussion about women of the past and their future accomplishments in the arts and crafts. The other personal reason is that Jacques and Hay furnished Rideau Hall originally, so in one sense it brought the silver home.



I did not know anyone working in silver so I went online, where, in mid-2015, I discovered the remarkable silversmith Lois Etherington Betteridge. I wrote to her and was thrilled to receive a reply. We met later that year and she agreed to support the project through her organization, the Metal Collective. Since then, a number of meetings and much online communication have resulted

Myra Tulonen Smith's contribution
For more details please see p. 81

in 15 artists from across Canada drawing up written proposals and visual concepts. Each artist has chosen one category from the arts as the theme for their candlestick or lamp holder: architecture, crafts, dance, design, film and video, gastronomy, history, horticulture, music, painting and drawing, photography, sculpture, textile and fashion, theatre, and writing. Inspired by the category of art the maker selected, each has incorporated a piece of historic silver into their designs. I did not have enough silver for the project so another family with similar origins to mine has joined us. The Britton and Cronyn families have deep roots in Ontario's early judiciary and ecclesiastical worlds. Our families have been friends for generations, so the interconnection of past and future, that is so much a feature of this project, continues.

Before we melted down 20kg of family silver for the project, a museum expert ascertained which pieces were collectable or sellable and these were removed and kept. Finding out that most refined silver like ours generally ends up in myriad prosaic industrial uses, like dental fillings, made the decision to repurpose it as art even easier.

We would like to tour the finished works and have applied to the Canada Council for help to do this. We may not succeed. Perhaps craft's position in the Canadian art hierarchy can be viewed as parallel to the relative invisibility of women in the Confederation story to date. We know we have work to do, but we also know that six generations of Canadian women who appreciated the craft of silver are behind us materially, and in spirit. It makes the journey easier.

Laura Brandon is a freelance writer, curator, and lecturer specializing in international and Canadian war art. From 1992 to 2015, she was the Historian, Art & War at the Canadian War Museum. She has written and lectured internationally for nearly 40 years and curated more than 45 exhibitions. She is currently an Adjunct Research Professor in the School for Studies in Art and Culture and in the History Department at Carleton University, Ottawa, ON

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