

The great Canadian painter, A.Y. Jackson, speaking of his exceptional colleague Lawren Harris, said:

"He believed that a country which ignored the arts left no record of itself worth preserving."

With creativity, imagination and innovation, the artists of British Columbia have been building a remarkable record that they will leave behind of the vibrant life of this province.

Despite the fact that historically every province in this country – except Newfoundland – has spent more per capita on the arts than British Columbia – the arts in British Columbia have been thriving.

Some of the most original and meaningful pieces of theatre, dance, music, opera and visual art have been created in British Columbia in the past 10 or 15 years. Work from this province has toured nationally and internationally. British Columbia can take enormous pride in the vitality of its arts scene and the calibre of work it produces. Our government – working on behalf of the citizens of this province – has a responsibility to protect the conditions that allow this work to thrive. And this work will not thrive if the recently announced cuts are allowed to stand.

The societies we value in history are the societies that have valued the artist. Art is the signature of civilizations.

The respected B.C. critic and journalist, Max Wyman, once said:

"Engagement with art – with the product of someone else's imagination – can change your life, often for the better, and sometimes profoundly."

The Vancouver Opera, Pacific Opera Victoria, Electric Company Theatre, Theatre Replacement, the PuSh Festival, the Playhouse Theatre Company, the Belfry Theatre, Theatre SKAM, Ballet B.C., Ballet Victoria, the Vancouver Symphony, the Victoria Symphony, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria – to name but a few of the exceptional arts organizations in this province – have all fed the souls and enriched and nourished the inner lives of our local audiences. In addition, many of these organizations have played to audiences across the country and – in several cases – beyond our nation's borders.

We cannot, as a civilized society, regard ourselves as being enlightened without the arts. And what of our young people – the future of this province – do they not deserve the opportunity to partake in the arts – to explore new ideas, to understand the world from different perspectives, to start to discover what it is to be human?

Almost all of the arts organizations in British Columbia engage in meaningful ways with the youth of this province. At the Belfry, our programme for high school students elicits incredible responses from the participants, such as:

"a very important and enlightening experience for me"

"it opened my eyes to a world I didn't know"

"it taught me the art of patience and true collaboration"

"it enhanced my critical thinking"

Is this of no importance?

The vibrant, unique, cutting-edge, high-quality theatre, dance, music, opera, and visual arts organizations in British Columbia have grown incrementally, through years of careful stewardship by experienced and dedicated staff members, through the participation of some of the country's most talented artists, through the support of enlightened, interested and excited audiences, and through the investments made by the governments that the people of this province have elected.

What has taken years to establish is being profoundly threatened with the stroke of a pen. We are seeing the artistic equivalent of clear-cutting: slashing without thinking, killing off the fully grown as well as the new growth just beginning to take root.

And let me be very clear: what is killed off today will not come back in five or 10 years when some political party decides to reinstate funding to the arts. It takes much longer for a wound to heal than it does to inflict it. Damage done by the current round of cuts will have a long and lasting effect on the arts in British Columbia, and our reputation beyond our borders.

We are proud of the physical magnificence of our province. We have every reason to be equally proud of our culture. Let the nourishment of art be the signature of BC – not the decimation of art. Allow our artists to continue to build the record of this province. Life is short. Art is long.

On behalf of the arts in British Columbia, we urge the committee to recommend that the government restore the BC Arts Council funding through the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts to its 2008 level; and that the government honour the Memo of Agreement that committed 33 1/3% of BC's gaming profits to charities of this province, including arts, culture, and heritage.

Art is not a matter of life and death. It's much more important than that. And all of the masterpieces have not yet been created.