

The CLGA National Portrait Collection: A History

On June 26, 1998, "25 Lives: Out and Proud" opened at the 519 Church Street Community Centre under the co-curatorship of Bruce Jones, CLGA president Edward Tompkins, and vice-president Robin Brownlie. As the official exhibition patron, Svend Robinson, MP Burnaby, opened the exhibition, while Bill Graham, MP Toronto Centre/Rosedale, made special remarks. That Sunday, June 28, the CLGA was the honorary patron of the Toronto Pride Parade.

Originally conceptualized as "9 Lives: Canadian Lesbians and Gays and the Building of Our Community," the project grew to honour twenty-five men and women to celebrate the CLGA's 25th anniversary. The initial inductees were chosen by a CLGA committee using three criteria: contribution to the growth of diverse out and proud communities, nationwide representation, and gender parity. As Brenda Brown, an NPC committee member, wrote in an e-mail in 1998, "We guided ourselves by looking for historic moments and queers with long-standing histories ...queers who had opened space in some way."

In addition to the challenge of selecting only twenty-five inductees, Bruce Jones tackled the difficulty of finding enough lesbian and gay artists to create the portraits. In the end, by calling the people he knew and asking if they knew any other artists, Bruce secured twenty-three artists, twenty-two of whom were lesbians or gay men, to create twenty-five commissioned portraits, donating their time and work to the CLGA.

In letters sent to the 1998 inductees, the exhibition, supported by a grant from the Lesbian and Gay Community Appeal, was described as follows: "The exhibit will consist of a portrait of each honouree, with a short text describing some of their past activities and achievements. We will need a few words from you naming what you think your most significant contributions have been." To parallel those guidelines, this retrospective similarly asked the original inductees to write a statement reflecting upon the last fourteen years: their accomplishments, involvements, and what the NPC, and "out and proud communities," mean to them today.

At the opening in 1998, Robin Brownlie announced that these portraits would become part of the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Portrait Collection within the Archives' holdings. The induction and exhibition were seen as a moment of transforming the CLGA into a national cultural organization, a valuable way to introduce those who had done so much for the gay and lesbian communities to a larger audience. Individuals in this exhibition were, as was written in promotional material for the 1998 exhibition, "part of some aspect of the struggle to gain the same rights as other citizens of this country enjoy." Furthermore, the portrait collection was seen as creating positive visibility for the queer community, as well as establishing a historical, and artistic, record.

There was also an echo exhibition on the walls the night of the 1998 induction. Colour copies of the portraits had been made, which could go on a tour to gay and lesbian groups across the country, while the originals could travel to galleries and museums. As Robin stated at the opening, "We will use the traveling shows as a way of...demonstrating the role that the Archives can play in bringing our histories alive in a way that is accessible to all." At the end of the evening, the originals were removed from the 519 while the copies remained on display.

The first stop on the national tour of the original portraits was the University of Saskatchewan Library in Saskatoon. Under the direction of Neil Richards, who would be inducted into the NPC in 2000, the exhibition opened at the university in January 1999. As Neil wrote to Edward

Tompkins during the planning stages for the exhibition, "The opportunities offered by your show have had a positive effect already in strengthening the unity of our local community." Specially-built blue wooden crates with velvet lining were used to ship the original portraits out west via Greyhound. The crates are still used to store most of the 1998 portraits at the CLGA.

The next stop was Edmonton in February of 1999; Regina followed, coordinated by Duncan Campbell, an artist who also created Neil Richard's NPC portrait. In e-mail correspondence to Edward, Neil mentioned that the exhibition "could be very useful in Regina where the gay and lesbian community is moving ahead well, despite greater opposition than it seems to face in Saskatoon." The exhibition finally returned to Toronto for a showing at City Hall in June of 1999. While stops had originally been planned for Ottawa, Vancouver, and Halifax, archival records indicate that the 1998 exhibition was not displayed in these cities in 1999, nor did the portrait copies tour nationally.

Much has changed since 1998. A nomination process was introduced, with a standardized intake form made available online in 2002. NPC committees began to include members of the community, and efforts have been made to solicit nominations, and commission artists, from the rest of Canada. In late 2002, the NPC was digitized and made available on the CLGA's website, furthering the Archives' aim of being a nationally-accessible organization. The language, too, has changed; the nomination form specifies that the NPC intends to honour those "who have made significant contributions to the growth of diverse, out and proud lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered communities in Canada."

In addition, the 2003 induction was held at the SAW Gallery in Ottawa; it was the first time an induction was held outside of Toronto, as well as presented in both French and English. As a result of a goal set in 2004, all the 2005 inductees were originally from outside of Ontario. While there was a lull in inductions between 2005 and 2010, as the Archives moved to its current home at 34 Isabella Street in 2009, inductions resumed in 2011. In 2011, the NPC Committee decided that only three would be inducted each year, while a diversity of media will continue to be encouraged.

There are now over seventy-five portraits in the National Portrait Collection, which are currently displayed around the building. As you reflect upon your visit, in the words of the 1998 exhibition's introductory panel, "We hope that you will all be inspired...and will, in your own everyday contributions to out and proud communities, consider yourself in their company."

Written by Jessica Parker, Curatorial Intern