



Nourishing the Learning Spirit – Allan Ryan’s 12th Annual New Sun Conference on Aboriginal Arts: Trailblazers



Conference welcome 2012

“The whole day was memorable. You can read about it, hear about it, and even watch the video, but being there is the only way that you can feel the positive energy that permeates the room! From the beginning when the elder, Jim Albert, smudged us and opened the day to the ending when Allan Ryan announced that there was a surprise gift for each of us, it was a day to remember. ... Will I be there next year? You betcha, with bells on ... and I intend to bring my husband and encourage all students in the Indigenous Studies program to attend as well. Thank you Professor Ryan for inviting us to participate in this wonderful event.” AB

Allan Ryan’s New Sun Conference on Aboriginal Arts has become an absolute capstone on Carleton University’s annual calendar. Since its inception in 2002, few events have been able to generate the sort of buzz and anticipation that New Sun evokes each year. Anyone who has attended one or more (likely more — few people attend only once) of Ryan’s previous conferences will enthusiastically explain that the first Saturday in March is one of those annual days that helps them to define that particular year in its entirety. The conference is inspired by personal stories of struggle and triumph. When those in attendance witness the creativity displayed by the speakers, they are invariably impressed with the infinite adaptability of contemporary Aboriginal culture and more hopeful about the viability of indigenous communities in Canada. They leave the New Sun Conference invigorated, fortified and with the satisfying knowledge that they have broadened their own horizons.

New Sun Conference speakers come from various First Nations, Metis and Inuit communities, as well as from the non-Native community. Presenters have included those with expertise in photography, painting, sculpture, film making, acting, musical performance, curating, arts education, literature and the culinary arts. Themes such as “healing through the arts,” “transforming traditions,” “engaging authenticity”, and “inspiring resilience” have been explored in a collegial and communal atmosphere that encourages dialogue on important cultural and artistic issues. New Sun honours, and seeks to raise public awareness of individuals whose work affirms contemporary Aboriginal experience and contributes to increase cross-cultural understanding.

This is not a standard research conference. In fact, few participants who leave the Carleton campus would classify what they had just attended as a ‘conference’. Though the New Sun Conference certainly has an academic edge, the gathering acts a lot more like a participatory festival than a traditional academic conference.

With the early morning smudging of the room with sage by Elder Jim Albert the conference is framed as an Aboriginal ceremony – a cleansing and healing ceremony which transforms the classroom where the conference is held into a sacred space of indigenous learning. Appropriately, the day’s activities have been described as nourishment for the soul.



Elder Jim Albert holding a sacred eagle feather, 2012

As Ryan explains, the conference focuses on the creative spirit within the broader Aboriginal community that celebrates both diversity and inclusivity:

“New Sun offers participants a chance to become a part of the informed minority. We feature positive, uplifting stories that don’t steer away from the tough issues to educate, and to give a sense of hope. We hit on the themes that are often missed by mainstream media. New Sun is a much needed antidote.”

Ryan creates a safe, intimate space that is entirely inclusive, meaning that those in attendance consider themselves to be participants more than an audience. His goal is to have every person at the conference feel that they have contributed, and feel that they have been inspired.

This is embodied at the always popular luncheon. The luncheon of Native foods has become a very important component of the conference – a way for those attending to socialize, network and discuss what they learned in the morning. It also offers an opportunity to witness, again in an intimate setting, up close and personal, a musical performance that they feel part of.

Ryan takes a great deal of pride in the fact that the New Conference is an entirely unique gift to those who attend.

“I view the New Sun Conference as a gift from Carleton to the community, however broadly we choose to define that term, possibly even an extraordinary gift – what makes something extraordinary, out of the ordinary? – that is dependent on the generosity of many people, not the least of whom are the presenters, and the funders,” says Ryan. “And I have the privilege and responsibility of organizing this event and making it as memorable and uplifting and spiritually nourishing as possible.”

Because of the unparalleled caliber and reputation of the conference, the New Sun Conference always attracts the most prominent names in Aboriginal arts. This year is no different, with a speaker’s list that includes: **Dorothy Grant**, haute couture fashion designer; **Daniel Heath Justice**, author and educator; **Tantoo Cardinal**, stage, film and television actress; **Gerald McMaster**, curator and visual artist; and **Lucie Idlout**, blues-rock singer/songwriter.



Git Hayetsk Dancers, 2011



Allan J. Ryan was appointed as the New Sun Chair in Aboriginal Art and Culture in 2001. The first of its kind in Canada, the Chair is situated in the School of Canadian Studies at Carleton. It was made possible through the support of the New Sun Fund, administered by the Community Foundation of Ottawa.

Ryan holds a joint appointment in the School of Canadian Studies and the Department of Art History in the School for Studies in Art and Culture. He teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses on indigenous topics and holds a special interest in contemporary Aboriginal issues and their aesthetic manifestation in literature, film and the visual arts. Many of these interests were brought together in his book, *The Trickster Shift: Humour and Irony in Contemporary Native Art* (UBC Press/U Washington Press), which won an American Book Award in 2000 for its contribution to multicultural literature. Ryan also conducted post-doctoral research on Aboriginal cartoonists at Simon Fraser University. In 2005 he co-curated the exhibition, *About Face: Self-Portraits by Native American, First Nations and Inuit Artists*, shown at the

Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian in Santa Fe, New Mexico. More recently he has lectured on Canadian Aboriginal art and cinema in China and Brazil.

In former lives Ryan worked as a graphic designer, and achieved a certain degree of notoriety as a popular and successful television satirist, singer-songwriter and recording artist.

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Impressions of past New Sun Conferences



Tanya Tagaq, 2010

-My New Sun Conference 2012 experience was an absolute delight, coupled with moments of inspired optimism for my future and my country and filled during the day with feelings of hope, faith, sadness, anger, joy and a deep gratitude for life. Qujannamiik Dr. Ryan and to all who made this happen. :) PP, 2012

-It was again a pleasant trip to Ottawa. I don't always have pleasant trips. I felt I had the "right to speak" cause what I had to say was important and worthwhile to listen to. That what we had to say and show was important and helpful. And you Allan are one amazing bridge, and an important one too. I think I am speaking in Inuktitut and translating it to English, which is how I usually speak anyway. Thank you again for the important day you invited me to. :) Evie Mark, throat singer and presenter, 2012.

-What a fantastic conference! I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I was crying the whole way home (words cannot truly describe how beautiful the event was.) Thank you so much. MSG, 2011.

-Well, Allan, After last year, I really didn't know what you could possibly do next. But you figured it out. Thanks enormously for another amazing day of people and art. FS, 2011.

-I am an MA art history student at Carleton U and a senior who had a successful professional career in another discipline. I should like to congratulate you on a most successful conference. It attracts people to return who have no aboriginal connection and who also lack any background in aboriginal contributions and culture. This is a fantastic outreach achievement. The span of the conference, embracing visual art, oral art, architecture, and dancers in performance, was outstanding. Mosha Folger and Douglas Cardinal were inspiring and remarkable for their achievements: both for native peoples in Canada and the rest of the Canadian population. In architecture, one has to wonder why projects like the ROM were not set in Douglas Cardinal's capable hands. The buffet luncheon of Native cuisine was outstanding. Best wishes for your future conferences which I plan to attend. You certainly meet the conference's objectives of "rais[ing] public awareness of an individual whose work affirms contemporary Aboriginal experience and contributes to increased cross-cultural understanding." I hope you find my comments helpful. I plan to attend future conferences: this was my first. Please do pass on my congratulations to all who contributed and participated! GH, 2011.



Tom Jackson, 2009



Watch!

Courtesy of Indigenous Culture and Media Innovations, a monthly half hour Rogers Cable TV show on Aboriginal youth in the nation's capital that airs on Sundays, The New Sun Conference also has a YouTube presence.

The producer and host of Indigenous Culture and Media Innovations, Joanie Mendowagen, planned on devoting 7-10 minutes of their March 2012 episode to the New Sun Conference. After attending the event, Mendowagen decided to devote the whole half hour to New Sun, saying it was the best conference she had ever attended.

Watch highlights from the 2012 edition of the New Sun Conference here:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=DoJ9B4aFsrw

***All conference presentations have been videotaped and archived on DVD in the Carleton University Library.**

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