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Vancouver Art Gallery receives \$1.5 million donation for new building

With the latest donation, the VAG now has raised \$86.5 million from the private sector for the new building. It's the most money ever raised by arts and culture organization in BC.

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Donald Ellis has donated \$1.5 million for a new building for the Vancouver Art Gallery at West Georgia and Cambie. PNG

The campaign to build a new Vancouver Art Gallery continues to grow with the donation of \$1.5 million by a long-time supporter.

The donation is from Donald Ellis, a Canadian art dealer whose gallery is based in New York. The Donald Ellis Gallery specializes in Northwest Coast art and other historical Indigenous North America art.

Including the Ellis donation, the Vancouver Art Gallery has raised \$86.5 million from the private sector to build a new gallery in downtown Vancouver. That figure represents the most money ever raised by an arts and culture organization in B.C.

The VAG announced the Ellis donation Monday.

Ellis said he was “stepping out on a limb a little bit” by making the donation and publicly supporting the capital campaign for a new building.

“It’s the right thing to do and it’s an extension of what I have been doing my whole career,” he said in a video about his VAG donation.

He said the VAG is first among art museums in Canada, and possibly in North America, in the way it has exhibited and showcased Indigenous art.

He cited the seminal exhibition Arts of the Raven exhibition at the VAG in 1967. Curated by Doris Shadbolt, the exhibition marked a fundamental shift in the way a Canadian art institution displayed Indigenous works of the Northwest Coast as art rather than anthropology.

A more recent example took place in 2013 in an exhibition of the work of Charles Edenshaw, the great Haida artist considered one of the most important 19th century Indigenous artists in North America.

Ellis recently donated five of Edenshaw’s works to the VAG: two bracelets (one gold, one silver) three silver spoons.

Because of his appearances on the U.S. version of the Antiques Roadshow, Ellis is one of the rare art dealers with a public presence. In one episode, he appraised a Navajo blanket for \$350,000 to \$500,000.

“The older man who brought it in starts to tear up, and it became one of the most famous appraisals in the show’s history,” John Mackie said in a [story in The Vancouver Sun](#) .

Originally from Ontario, Ellis has spent most of his time in B.C. for the past eight years.

[The Donald Ellis Gallery](#) client list includes The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa and the Musee de Quai Branly in Paris.



Donald Ellis. PNG

In the video, Ellis spoke passionately about the importance of a new VAG for the city.

“We need a new Vancouver Art Gallery now because Vancouver needs to decide what it wants to be,” he said.

Ellis said a new VAG building won’t only be a place for artists and collectors but also for children, youngsters and adults so they can have the kind of transformative experiences that come from being exposed to different kinds of art.

“We need this,” he said. “The community needs this.”

Ellis acknowledged the importance of Indigenous people to the history of the country. In a VAG news release, he said he’s committed to the new VAG building and the potential it has to promote reconciliation through art.

Daina Augaitis, the VAG’s interim director, said Ellis’ generosity brings the gallery “one step closer” to raising enough to build a new downtown art gallery.

“I’m thrilled that he is making such a remarkable commitment to showcase historical Indigenous art in the new gallery building,” she said in a gallery news release.

Including a \$50 million donation from the government of B.C. in 2008, the VAG has raised a total of \$136.5 million from public and private sources. The VAG is looking for \$100 million from the federal government and another \$50 million from Victoria .

The building designed by Herzog & de Meuron includes 80,000 sq. ft of exhibition space — more than double what the VAG has at 750 Hornby — a 300-seat theatre, and two free-access galleries.

The new gallery will be located on a site donated by the city of Vancouver at West Georgia and Cambie.