

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

U.S. Tariffs Threaten Canadian Artists and the Circulation of Indigenous Art

Visual Arts Alliance calls for immediate federal action to protect artists, galleries, cultural organizations, and Canada's visual arts marketplace

Ottawa, August 24th, 2026: The Visual Arts Alliance (VAA) is calling on the Government of Canada to respond to the additional 50% tariffs announced by the United States on a wide range of Canadian goods, including original artworks and materials used by Indigenous artists.

Two-thirds of Canada's cultural exports go to one country - the United States. In 2023, Canada exported \$27.1 billion in cultural products, of which \$18.1 billion went to the United States. That concentration was always a risk. Since February 2025, it has become a liability. The United States declined to renew CUSMA in its current form in July, and on August 22, new 50% tariffs took effect on a wide range of Canadian goods, applying to CUSMA-compliant products, with no expiry date. For a sector built on small operators and thin margins, this is not an abstraction. Artists lose income, galleries lose buyers, and the cross-border exhibitions and residencies that sustain Canadian work internationally quietly stop happening.

The VAA Calls on the Government of Canada to:

1. **Pursue an immediate exemption for original Canadian artworks and culturally significant materials** from the additional U.S. tariffs.
2. **Provide targeted financial relief** to artists, galleries, Indigenous-owned businesses, and cultural organizations experiencing increased costs, delayed shipments, cancelled sales, or lost exhibition opportunities because of tariffs and border disruptions.
3. **Establish an emergency support and stabilization program** for visual arts organizations and businesses affected by ongoing Canada–U.S. trade instability.
4. **Make purchases of original Canadian art GST-exempt**, recognizing Canadian art as both a cultural good and an important contributor to the national economy.
5. **Work with Indigenous artists and arts organizations** to ensure that federal trade responses recognize the cultural significance of traditional materials and do not treat Indigenous cultural works solely as commercial commodities.
6. **Develop clear customs and border guidance for artworks**, including temporary exports, touring exhibitions, loans, and returns, to prevent unnecessary delays and inconsistent treatment at the border.

These tariffs add significant uncertainty for artists, galleries, businesses, museums, collectors, and cultural organizations already navigating an increasingly unstable Canada–U.S. trading environment. **The published list includes paintings, drawings, pastels and collages; original prints and lithographs; sculptures and jewellery; textiles, wood products and other handmade works; as well as raw furskins, fur products, hides and skins, and materials including bone, whalebone, horn, antler, hooves, claws and beaks.**

The inclusion of original artworks and culturally significant materials is a serious concern for Canada's visual arts communities. For many Indigenous artists, these materials are inseparable

from cultural knowledge, community practice and intergenerational teaching. Measures that increase the cost of creating, exhibiting, transporting, or selling these works risk affecting not only artists' economic opportunities but also the transmission, visibility, and continued vitality of Indigenous cultural practices.

The impact of these measures would extend well beyond individual artists. Indigenous artists, curators, galleries, museums, collectors, arts organizations, and Indigenous-owned businesses all contribute to the creation, exhibition, acquisition, and circulation of Indigenous art. Although the proposed tariffs are framed as trade measures, their consequences would be felt throughout this cultural ecosystem.

Increased tariffs and continued trade instability will:

- Reduce sales to U.S. collectors, museums, and galleries by making Canadian and Indigenous artwork more expensive in one of Canada's largest export markets.
- Increase customs, brokerage, insurance, and transportation costs for artists, commercial galleries, and Indigenous-owned businesses participating in international exhibitions, art fairs, and sales.
- Discourage cross-border exhibitions and cultural exchange by increasing the cost of artwork loans, acquisitions, touring exhibitions, and temporary imports and exports.
- Reduce earned income for artists who already face limited access to national and international markets due to geography, transportation costs, and the realities of living and working in northern and remote communities.
- Affect Indigenous businesses that rely on the sale of handcrafted jewellery, clothing, carvings, textiles, and cultural works made with traditional materials.
- Create uncertainty for museums, public galleries, universities, and collectors acquiring Indigenous and other Canadian artwork for exhibitions, research, public programming, and permanent collections.

For a sector built largely on small operators and thin margins, tariffs are not an abstract trade issue. Galleries operate through shared-revenue models with artists while absorbing substantial costs associated with exhibitions, shipping, insurance, storage, staffing, marketing, art fairs and international representation. Artworks are often unique, one-of-a-kind objects whose prices are shaped by an artist's career, market position, provenance and collector demand. When tariff-related costs are added to a transaction, they cannot necessarily be passed on to the buyer.

A U.S. collector faced with a substantially higher price may postpone a purchase or choose to acquire an artwork from a U.S.-based artist or gallery instead. The result is a direct loss of competitiveness for Canadian artists and galleries. At the same time, increased customs, brokerage, insurance, and transportation costs, combined with uncertainty over tariff classification and treatment, could make cross-border transactions more complicated, expensive, and difficult to undertake.

Canadian art is not simply another category of merchandise. It carries cultural knowledge, history, identity, and relationships between communities. The Government of Canada must act quickly to protect artists' livelihoods, sustain the organizations and businesses that support them, and preserve the international circulation of Canadian and Indigenous art.

The VAA urges the Government of Canada to recognize the visual arts as an essential part of Canada's cultural and economic infrastructure and to ensure that artists, galleries, and cultural communities are not left to absorb the consequences of trade instability alone.

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