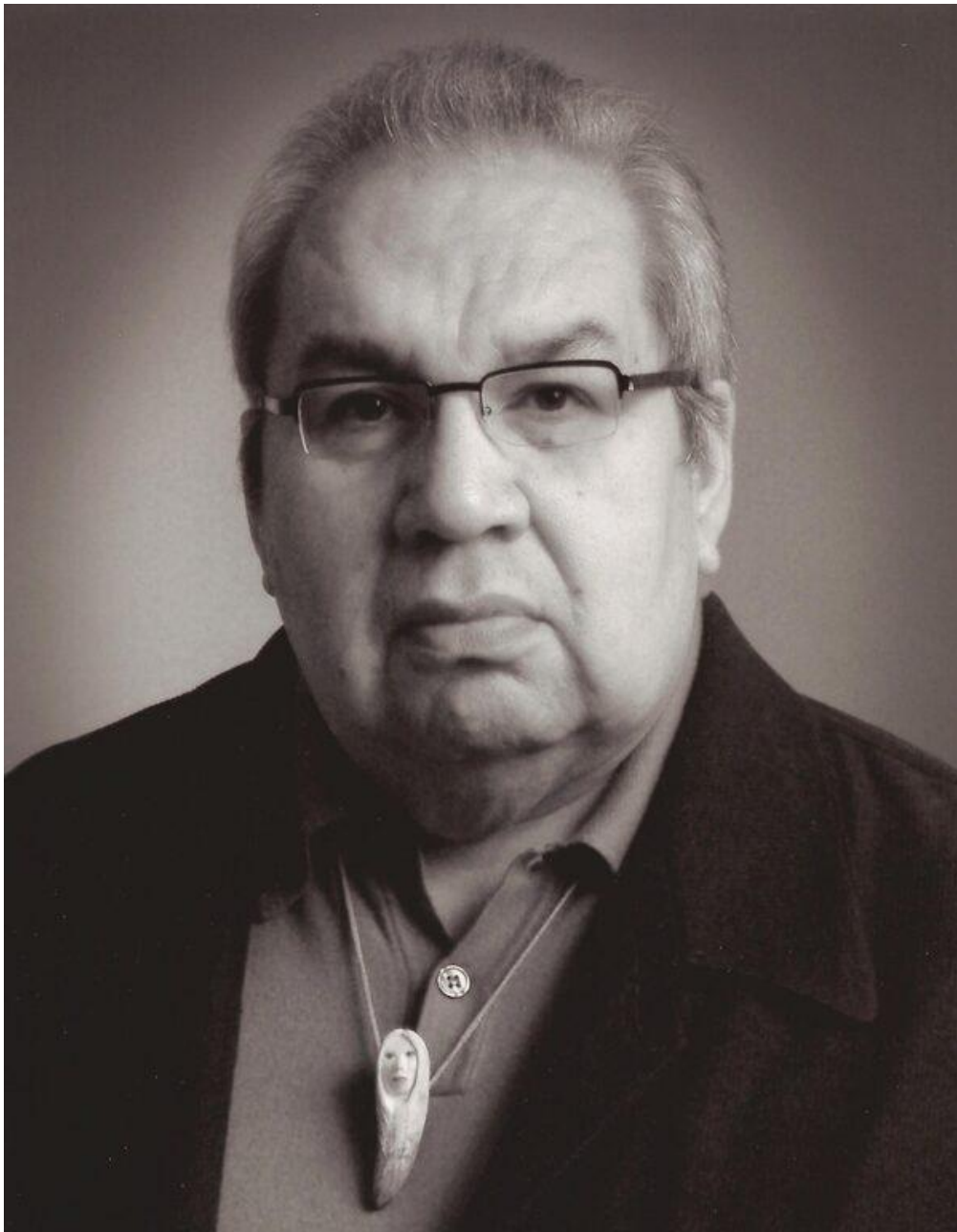


OBITUARY

# Curator Tom Hill was ‘a beacon of light’ for Indigenous artists

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Tom Hill helped raise the stature of Indigenous artists in Canada, opening a dialogue that offered a more realistic depiction of Indigenous peoples.

WOODLAND CULTURAL CENTRE

Thomas Vernon Hill was an artist, curator, art historian, arts administrator and champion of Indigenous culture. For more than half a century, he contributed mightily to raising the stature of Indigenous artists in Canada, particularly through his work at the Woodland Cultural Centre in Brantford, Ont. Known as Tom to his many admirers in Canada's cultural milieu and on the international scene, Mr. Hill was a member of the Konadaha Seneca. He died in the company of his family on Nov. 11 at the age of 80.

He was born on May 9, 1943, to Alton and Daisy (née Johnson) Hill at Oshweken, in the Grand River Territory of the Six Nations, near Brantford. He graduated from the Ontario College of Art (now [OCAD University](#)) in 1967 and continued his studies on a scholarship at the National Gallery of Canada and Carleton University.

Expo 67 was a turning point for Mr. Hill, who contributed a ceramic mural at the event's Indians of Canada Pavilion. He began a dialogue with fellow Indigenous artists offering a more realistic, less stereotypical or romanticized depiction of Indigenous peoples.

In 1968 he was named director of the Cultural Affairs section of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs. In that role he was instrumental in displaying and promoting the work of Indigenous artists. Among those he mentored was actor and musician Gary Farmer, who worked for the Woodland Cultural Centre starting in 1973, driving a bus to exhibit art in Indigenous communities.

"It was a precious period for me," said Mr. Farmer, who had grown up largely in the United States and was reconnecting with his Six Nations community at the time.

"Tom was a big help to me. He saw something in me. He was this guy in the background, the sensible guy government could trust."

In 1977, during Mr. Hill's 14-year stint as a civil servant, Mr. Farmer was among a group of Indigenous artists Mr. Hill selected to meet Queen Elizabeth on a royal visit.

Throughout his time in Ottawa, Mr. Hill remained close to his Six Nations community and the development of the Woodland Cultural Centre. It was built on the site of the Mohawk Institute Residential School, known as the Mush Hole because of the bowls of poor-quality mushy porridge served to students there.

The Six Nations community took possession of the principal building in the 1970s and made it into a museum and cultural hub.

“It’s significant that we are on a residential-school site,” said Woodland Cultural Centre executive director Heather George. “We are engaged here in building resiliency through contemporary art and in that way also building on Tom’s legacy. Every day I come in here I realize how I and the communities benefit from his generosity and kindness.”

Mr. Hill was museum director at the Woodland Cultural Centre from 1982 to 2005, but his presence was felt far beyond the Brantford facility.

“I met Tom on almost my first day at the [Royal Ontario Museum],” said Trudy Nicks, senior curator emeritus at the ROM. “He was this wonderful, smiley, happy person who walked into my office to welcome me to the ROM. He became an important colleague, a friend and a mentor. Although he was at Woodland, it was hard to pin him down to a single role. He was very involved with the wider museum community. He was absolutely critical in building bridges between communities.”

In 1988, a controversy erupted concerning *The Spirit Sings*, an exhibition at Calgary’s Glenbow Museum that coincided with the [Winter Olympics](#) in that city. The Lubicon Lake Cree called for a boycott because the show’s sponsor, Shell Canada, was drilling in an area they claimed as their traditional lands. The brouhaha brought forward a cluster of tensions concerning Indigenous peoples, anthropology, ethnology and the role of museums. In the aftermath, the federal government set up a national task force to explore the issues. Its co-chairs were Mr. Hill and Ms. Nicks.

“It was an excellent opportunity to see his skills and insights. He was very open to working together,” Ms. Nicks said. Their report “was more than just a laundry list,” she said. “It dealt with the urgency of Indigenous involvement, access and opportunity. It didn’t solve everything, but it showed both sides a way of going forward.”

In *Creation’s Journey: Native American Identity and Belief*, a book Mr. Hill co-edited for the Smithsonian Institution in 1994, he wrote, “the task force called for new partnerships between institutions and First Peoples to be based on such principles as mutual appreciation, the recognition of shared interests, and full involvement of

Native Americans in the development of policies and programs. All this is a far cry from the practices of the past.”

Mr. Hill published widely including co-authoring the book *Norval Morrisseau and the Emergence of The Image Makers*, with Elizabeth McLuhan, in 1984.

As he emerged as a force as a curator and museum director, Mr. Hill put his own career as a visual artist on hold. Of that decision he told an interviewer in 2004, “You can’t be the patient and be the doctor too. Here I am now taking the role of the curator, and so I can’t do my own art. ... I’ve let my own art career go by the wayside.”

Museum director Rick Hill (no relation), who co-edited *Creation’s Journey: Native American Identity and Belief* with Tom Hill, called his friend and collaborator a bridge-builder, saying, “He was a cultural mediator here between Christians, Longhouse People and people in between to bring people together just as he was also a cultural mediator to government.”

“He was one of the few people who could talk about Picasso, the Canadian arts movement or a sacred object,” Rick Hill added. “We didn’t always agree, but he got me to rethink things. His greatest gift was to get us to think about what we think, what we make and what we say. He did that while maintaining and even embellishing Haudenosaunee intellectual tradition. He thought tradition could be used to fashion a new future.”

Tom Hill’s community involvement included participation with Old Mush, a group of male singers who perform traditional Six Nations songs. They sang at Mr. Hill’s funeral service at Oshweken.

Tom Hill had many diverse achievements over a long, productive life. In addition to museum direction and visual arts, he also contributed to stage productions. He worked on the script of *Paddle Song*, a one-woman show about Mohawk poet Pauline Johnson, with writer Dinah Christie.

In 2015, Mr. Hill invited Cheri Maracle, a Haudenosaunee/Irish actress, singer, playwright and professional host, to read for the lead part. Ms. Maracle was stunned when Mr. Hill reached out. “I first met him when I was a young girl. I was really floored by who he was, by his breadth. He was someone I aspired to be like.” She got the role.



Tom Hill with Haudenosaunee/Irish actress Cheri Maracle. Maracle got the lead role in *Paddle Song*, which Hill worked on, and plays a water drum given to her by the curator at one point in the play.

CHERI MARACLE

*Paddle Song*, featuring Ms. Maracle, toured Canada and was staged in Norway. She also performed excerpts from the show in New Delhi. As she sings at one point in the play, Ms. Maracle beats a water drum given to her by Tom Hill. “Getting the drum ready by soaking it and stretching it is part of my warm-up for the show every night.” In addition to remembering his sense of humour and lovely giggle, Ms. Maracle recalls his “infectious enthusiasm and his positive support. He was instrumental in seeing Indigenous artists succeed. He was a beacon of light to so many people.”

Among his many honours, Mr. Hill was named to the Order of [Ontario](#) in 1993 and received the Governor-General’s Award for Visual and Media Arts, and honorary fellowships from the Canadian Museum Association and OCAD University. He was a

member of OCAD University's Indigenous Education Council from 2008 to 2018 and received an honorary doctorate from Wilfred Laurier University in 2003.

Tom Hill leaves his wife of 48 years, Roberta Jamieson; his sister, Rose Margaret Hill; daughter, Jessica; and grandchildren, Daisy, Miles and Lyla (Bird).