

## **Varley McKay-Art Foundation of Markham**

### **Varley Gallery (Hybrid Meeting)**

#### **Minutes**

**Monday, February 9, 2026**

**6:00 PM**

#### **Attendance:**

---

**Board of Directors Present:** Jim Schmidt (Chair), Craig McOuat (Vice-Chair), Connie Leclair (Governance Chair), Councillor Reid McAlpine, Arpita Surana, Paul Cicchini and Nik Mracic

**Staff Present:** Niamh O'Laoghaire, Director, Varley Art Gallery; Francesca Dauphinais, Foundation Cultural Development Officer, Laura Gold, Clerk

**Regrets:** Josy Jamieson, Sophia Sun, Amin Giga, and Vinay Sharda, Director of Economic Development, Culture & Entrepreneurship

---

#### **1. Call to Order**

The Varley-McKay Art Foundation of Markham convened at 6:10 PM with Jim Schmidt in the Chair

#### **2. Disclosure of Pecuniary Interests**

There were no disclosures of pecuniary interests.

#### **3. Minutes**

Moved by Councillor Reid McAlpine

Seconded by Connie Leclair

That the Minutes of December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2025, and January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2026, Varley McKay Art Foundation of Markham, be approved as presented.

**Carried**

#### **4. Director's Report**

Niamh O’Laoghaire, Director, Varley Art Gallery, presented the Director’s Report. Some of the highlights of the report included:

### 1. Congratulations & Philanthropic Success

- The Director formally congratulates the Foundation on the successful February 3, 2026 recognition event honouring Dr. Sylvester and Mrs. Pauline Chuang.
- The Gallery will benefit from a 10-year Chuang Scholarship Program, marking a significant long-term investment in the Varley.
- Special acknowledgment is given to those involved in negotiations and event planning, including Francesca Dauphinais.

### 2. Performance / Venue Partnerships (Zoe Kwan Collaboration)

- The report explains the history, rationale, and alignment of the Varley’s partnership with Zoe Kwan, responding to Board interest.
- Zoe Kwan’s earlier work with the City of Markham through public art and community dance programming was outlined.
- Two major Varley collaborations are highlighted:
  - Eternal Echoes (August–September 2024): site-specific, ticketed performances with complementary free workshops.
  - Fractals of Possibilities (January 16–18, 2026): immersive dance performances during an otherwise “dark” exhibition period, fully sold out (150 attendees).
- These partnerships:
  - Generated no rental loss and minimal cost to the Varley beyond staff time.
  - Supported local, emerging, and BIPOC artists.
  - Aligned with the Varley’s strategic vision as a dynamic cultural hub and with the City’s Markham is More: Economic Development and Culture Strategy (2023–2027).

### 3. Charter & Governance Clarification

- The Director of the Gallery and the City’s Director of Economic Development, Culture & Entrepreneurship met with City’s Assistant City Solicitor to address Board questions about the Foundation’s governing documents.
- The Assistant City Solicitor has prepared a concise summary of the Foundation’s Charter and governance structure.

- The Assistant City Solicitor has offered to:
  - Attend the March 9, 2026, Board meeting, and/or
  - Meet with Board members in advance for clarification and discussion.

#### 4. Exhibitions Update

- Sameer Farooq: The Fairest Order in the World and Sketching the Past installations were scheduled for completion by early February, with a public launch on February 7, 2026.
- The McMichael Canadian Art Collection has confirmed that the Varley will be the inaugural venue for *Listen to the Land*, a national touring exhibition, planned for the Winter/Spring 2027 rotation.

#### 5. Public Programs

- An update of public programs was provided.

#### 6. Rentals & Community Partnerships

- An update on rentals and community partnerships was provided.

#### 7. Facilities & Operations

- An update on facilities was provided.

The following was discussed regarding the Director's report:

#### **Original Donors**

Emphasis was placed on communicating donor generosity and reconnecting with those who originally helped build the Gallery, including engaging a second generation of supporters.

#### **Dance Performance**

The dance performance was generally well received, though there were concerns about venue size, public accessibility, and promotion. Members suggest repeating the performance in the future, with Board access to tickets, while ensuring better public availability and promotion.

Ms. O'Laoghaire clarified that the performers were responsible for their own promotion, and that the performance was viewed as fitting the goal of maximizing the Gallery as an arts hub and supporting long-term relationships with local groups (e.g. Markham Group of Artists).

#### **Charter & Governance**

The Board acknowledged that Lisa Riegel, Assistant City Solicitor, reviewing the documents with staff, providing a summary of all governing documents, and her willingness to attend the March 9<sup>th</sup> Board meeting is a step in the right direction, with a desire to develop a workable governance approach for all parties.

### **McMichael Exhibition**

Ms. O'Laoghaire confirmed that as requested by the Board Chair, she had contacted the McMichael Canadian Art Collection and they had confirmed the Varley as the inaugural venue for a 2027 *Listen to the Land* exhibition. Insurance requirements were discussed, including the potential need to add coverage for a \$30 million exhibition (estimated additional cost is \$6-7K), but this could also possibly be done through the City's insurance contract if sufficient lead time is provided.

Cross-promotion opportunities were agreed upon between the Varley and the McMichael via cross-advertising the galleries via their newsletters.

The Directors saw the McMichael exhibition as a fundraising opportunity, telling the Gallery's story—past, present, and future. Merchandise ideas were discussed (unique items, mugs, reproductions), noting that past efforts to sell merchandise was volunteer-run and paused during COVID. Targeted, strategic merchandise placement could be successful if space allows for the sale of merchandise.

The Board had a significant discussion about when to present the Group of Seven exhibition, with a preference expressed for summer or fall if possible. A motion was proposed and discussed that the Foundation prefers the Group of Seven exhibition be presented in the summer rather than the winter, subject to existing commitments, but the motion was not voted on.

Members acknowledged that different exhibitions attract different audiences, including tourists. Discussion emphasized balancing Group of Seven, Canadian, Indigenous, and diverse narratives, noting that Canadian art is broader than a single cultural lens. The McMichael partnership was seen as a valuable opportunity to broaden perspectives and audience reach. Holding it in the summer months was thought to possibly draw a larger audience; while holding it in the winter months was seen as an opportunity to increase Gallery attendance during its quieter months.

The Directors briefly discussed their advisory role, noting their desire to provide feedback on exhibitions and other Gallery activities earlier on in the planning process. They also expressed their interest in having more Varley works shown as part of the permanent collection.

The Director of the Gallery advised that the Board's advisory function is in relation to the operations of the Gallery. She emphasized the importance of rotating exhibitions—rather than having permanent displays— to keep the Gallery dynamic and relevant. She further noted that the Gallery does not have a substantial collection of Varley paintings and that most of the works that they have are on paper and can only be displayed for a short timeframe prior to them having to be placed back in the vault to conserve and protect the artwork. To address this, Varley artworks are sometimes mixed with other Canadian artworks.

In response to a query from the Board, the Director of the Gallery reported that data collection (postal codes) revealed higher-than-expected Gallery attendance from outside Markham, though seasonal trends remain unclear at this time due to the short timeframe the data has been collected for.

## **5. Development Officer Report**

Francesca Dauphinais, Cultural Development Officer, presented her Directors Report. Some of the highlights of the report included the following:

- *Boots for Arts* sponsorship package under review.
- Desire to better understand donor motivations and storytelling.
- Board support requested for donor conversations.
- A monthly giving program is in development, with hopes to launch in April (Connie Leclair is the subcommittee chair of the monthly giving program).
- Regarding the donor recognition event held last week, emphasis was placed on storytelling, with each event acting an opportunity to attract other donors.

## **5. Financial Report**

There was no Financial Report presented; a draft 2026 budget is in progress.

## **6. New Business**

Craig McOuat, Vice-Chair, inquired about recognition initiatives, including dedicating acknowledgements to past Board of Directors and donors, specifically asking about the work that had been done by Edie Yeomans on this matter.

The Director of the Gallery advised that a purchase of artwork dedicated to a Past Board of Director was done in the past, and that this is a practice that could be considered on a go forward basis.

The Cultural Development Officer reported that there is little documentation of the work Edie Yeomans was working on regarding the recognition program. Ernestine

Tahedl, Past Board of Director, may have information on what Edie was working on as she was also part of the Sub-Committee.

#### **7. Next Meeting Date**

The next meeting of the Varley-McKay Art Foundation of Markham will be held on March 9, 2026.

#### **8. Adjournment**

The Varley-McKay Art Foundation of Markham adjourned at 8:07 PM.