# Call for Artists: Black History Portraits at the St. Catharines Museum

St. Catharines Museum | Exhibit: “To Stay Free You Must Be Brave”

The St. Catharines Museum is seeking one Black artist located in the Niagara Region to create six vibrant, contemporary digital portraits of significant figures in Black history in Niagara. The portraits will be featured on banners with interpretive text, as a marquee element of the museum’s new permanent space for Black history interpretation, and are expected to remain on display for up to five years.

## Project Overview

- **Opportunity:** Commission of six contemporary portraits, delivered as digital files for large-format printing at 24 x 24 inches on banners that will feature interpretive text.
- **Who may apply:** Black artists located in the Niagara Region. One artist will be selected to create all six portraits.
- **Budget:** $700 per portrait; $4,200 CAD total.
- **How to apply:** Online application form on the City’s Call to Artists website.
- **Portfolio only:** up to 10 images of previous work.
- **Application Deadline:** Friday, November 20, 2026.
- **Final artwork due:** Monday, January 18, 2027, as high-definition, high-resolution image or vector files.
- **Production:** The Museum is responsible for print production (vinyl or fabric banners, 24 x 24 inches), which begins after the final artwork deadline.
- **Key requirement:** Artists must be comfortable creating two portraits interpretively from historical information, with limited visual reference.

## About the Black History Interpretive Space

A central and permanent space for interpreting Black history was identified as a part of the museum’s interpretive planning process in 2019. Establishing the space is one of the key elements of implementing the interpretive plan.

# About the Exhibit: “To Stay Free You Must Be Brave”

The enduring contributions of Black Canadians in our local history date back to early settlement and are therefore interwoven with the historical narrative at the foundation of our community.

The history of Black Canadians in Niagara is fundamental to understanding the region's development over the past 250 years. From early settlement through the era of slavery, abolition, and contemporary community building, Black experiences have been deeply intertwined with the social, political, and cultural history of St. Catharines.

The historical marginalization of these experiences has obscured public understanding of Black history but especially Black life in Upper Canada prior to the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1833.

The arrival of Freedom Seekers during the mid-nineteenth century strengthened anti-slavery sentiment in the Niagara region and positioned communities such as St. Catharines within broader transnational networks of abolitionist activism to receive them as they arrived on the Underground Railroad.

The time spent - whether temporary or permanent - and support offered by this community to Freedom Seekers have forever tied St. Catharines and American communities together, with descendants continuing to visit St. Catharines to this day.

Black residents who remained following emancipation continued to shape the social, economic, cultural, and civic life of St. Catharines, demonstrating the enduring presence and influence of Black communities across generations.

Black Canadians have encountered individual, systemic, generational, and institutionalized racism throughout our history. This painful but important reality helps us to understand the context of the historical and modern experiences Black Canadians endured. Othering people in all aspects of society including education, religion, government, property ownership and business, membership in community groups, healthcare, and military service, only further entrenches ignorance, racism, and otherness. These patterns of exclusion and racialization are core to our understanding of not only the experiences of Black Canadians but also of what our community collectively believes and values.

Despite 250 years of hard work, racism, enslavement, struggle, success, and community building, Black Canadians have made their mark on our community. This exhibit celebrates these stories and reminds us of these integral contributions that have enriched our collective story.

The title for this exhibit comes from a poem written by Helen Smith (1916-1994):

“…To stay free you must be brave
And when confronted with things like these

You must fight against the tyrant's knife to uphold liberty
…It's what a man has in him,
And what good can he be
To uphold your standards in this land of the free."

## Vision for the Portraits

The St. Catharines Museum strives to convey historical narrative through the stories of artifacts and people. Throughout the implementation of the 2019 Interpretive Plan, special focus has been paid to highlighting local and significant individuals with connections to major themes by sharing their photo and story through "My Story" panels in each exhibit. Each panel has a brief biography and photo explaining the connection between the person and the narrative.

Each portrait will be featured on a banner with interpretive text, similar to the "My Story" panels, and will be accompanied by an artifact from the museum's collection representing that story and the period in which the person lived. Portraits will be reproduced at 24 x 24 inches, and artists should keep in mind that the portrait will share the banner with the interpretive text.

## Scope and Deliverables

- Six portraits in total: four of individuals with existing photographs (varying in quality and composition), Anthony Burns, Harriet Tubman, Richard Ball, and Mal Nicholson, and two interpretive portraits of Richard Pierpoint and John Washington Lindsay.
- The artist works in consultation with Museum staff, who will provide source material and feedback on the portrait designs. Slight revisions should be expected.
- Portraits will be reproduced and printed at 24 x 24 inches. Final artwork is provided to the Museum as a high-definition, high-resolution image or vector file suitable for printing at that size. Detailed file specifications will be provided to the selected artist.
- Artists who paint or texture their work are responsible for digitizing it at high quality. The artist keeps the original artwork.
- The Museum is responsible for print production (vinyl or fabric banners, 24 x 24 inches).

**There are no known historical photographs of John Washington Lindsay or Richard Pierpoint, two prominent Black figures in local history. Two of the six portraits must therefore be created interpretively, from limited visual references.** Photographs of the other four individuals vary in quality and composition.

- Applicants must be comfortable generating a portrait of a historical figure for whom no direct visual reference exists, working from historical information and drawings rather than a photograph.
- The Museum will provide historical material for both portraits, and the artist will develop them in close consultation with Museum staff. Revisions should be expected, particularly on these two portraits.
- The two interpretive portraits must match the style, quality and presentation of the other four, so that all six read as one cohesive set.
- **By applying, you confirm that you are comfortable with this approach.**

## Artistic Direction

- Vibrant, contemporary portraits, either created digitally, or textured or painted and then digitized.
- Colour is essential: please avoid black and white or sepia tone treatments.
- Stylized but dignified: we hope to avoid a cartoonish look.

## Production Needs and Conditions

- **Tight production timeline.** Final artwork is due Friday, January 22, 2027. Museum staff are available through December 16 and return on January 4, so artists should expect to work independently during that time. Please apply only if you can commit to this schedule.
- **No AI.** Portraits must be the original work of the artist. Generative AI tools may not be used to create the artwork, including the two interpretive portraits.
- **Reproduction rights.** Because the portraits will be digitally printed, the Museum will require limited reproduction rights for the banners and for exhibition documentation and publicity. The copyright permissions granted for this project apply strictly to the core project deliverables, and do not include merchandizing rights. Any merchandizing opportunities shall be negotiated under a separate agreement and will require additional payment to the artist.

## Budget

The commission budget is **$700 per portrait, for a total of $4,200 CAD** for six portraits. There is no cost to apply. The Museum will discuss the duration of reproduction rights and any additional copyright or reproduction fees with the selected artist ahead of any additional preparation.

## Timeline

- **Wednesday, November 4, 2026:** Call for Artists published (open for at least two weeks).

- **Friday, November 20, 2026:** Application deadline. Portfolio only (up to 10 images of previous work).
- **Monday, November 23 to Thursday, November 26:** Museum reviews applications and selects the artist.
- **Friday, November 27, 2026:** Selected artist notified by email and begins working directly with the Museum.
- **Monday, November 30 to Friday, December 4:** Project kick-off; agreement confirmed; source material provided for all six portraits. The Museum discusses reproduction rights and any additional fees with the artist ahead of any additional preparation.
- **Friday, December 11, 2026:** Concept sketches for all six portraits due, including the two interpretive portraits.
- **Wednesday, December 16, 2026:** Museum staff feedback on concepts provided.
- **Thursday, December 17, 2026 to Sunday, January 3, 2027:** Main production period.
- **Monday, January 4, 2027:** Museum staff return. Near-final portraits submitted for staff review.
- **Friday, January 8, 2027:** Staff feedback on near-final portraits provided.
- **Monday, January 11 to Monday, January 18, 2027:** Final revisions and preparation of final files.
- **Monday, January 18, 2027 (final deadline):** Final artwork due (high-definition, high-resolution image or vector files).
- **After January 18, 2027:** Museum begins print production (vinyl or fabric banners, 24 x 24 inches); installation to follow (dates to be confirmed by the Museum).

# Eligibility

- This call is open to Black artists located in the Niagara Region or who identify as descendants of Freedom Seekers outside of Niagara. One artist will be selected to create all six portraits.
- The artist must be comfortable creating two portraits interpretively from historical information, without a visual reference.
- The artist must be able to meet the production timeline, work in consultation with Museum staff, and make slight revisions based on feedback.

# How to Apply

- Apply through the online application form on the City of St. Catharines Call to Artists website: https://webforms.stcatharines.ca/Culture/Black-History-Portraits-at-the-Museum
- Submit up to 10 images of your previous work by **Friday, November 20, 2026**. This is a portfolio-only application.

- Your application should include your name, email address, phone number and city or town, and confirm that you are comfortable creating interpretive portraits of historical figures without a visual reference.
- The selected artist will be notified by email by Friday, November 27, 2026, and will then begin working directly with the Museum.
- Questions? Contact Culture Services at culture@stcatharines.ca