

Arts Awards - Co-Design Process Report

OVERVIEW

Over several months Arts Ottawa has led a community-driven process to reimagine the longstanding Ottawa Arts Council Arts Awards.

For over 35 years, the arts awards celebrated artistic excellence and helped shape the city's cultural identity by recognizing outstanding contributions across disciplines and generations. As the Council evolved into Arts Ottawa, it became clear that this legacy program needed to grow alongside the changing arts sector it helped define.

Through a thoughtful community co-design process, we invited artists, cultural workers, and community members to reimagine the awards together. Rooted in our commitment to equity, transparency, and shared leadership, this collaborative redesign ensures the awards reflect the diversity, realities, and aspirations of Ottawa's arts community today. The renewed program will deepen its impact, foster new collaborations, and remain grounded in the values that have long made the awards meaningful, while aligning with Arts Ottawa's mission and vision for the future.

The proposed changes are in direct response to the community's priorities.

ENGAGEMENT PHASES

- *February 28, 2025: Open Office Hours (virtual)*
 - 13 participants
 - This initial engagement affirmed the question of whether the awards were still of value and cultural/community relevance.
 - Initial publicly held conversations with artists, administrators, and community members emphasized the need for:
 - Collaboration with existing awards rather than launching a new standalone program
 - Redefining terms like "emerging" and "mid-career"
 - Artist-centered recognition, post-award support, and multilingual inclusion
 - A celebratory, inclusive event that builds community
- *April 21, 2025: Inaugural Working Group Meeting (virtual)*
 - 26 participants
 - Following the Open Office Hours we formed a Community Advisory Circle (working group) with artists and stakeholders to lead the next phases of co-design. This was done through direct outreach to past participants and willing volunteers.

- *June 4, 2025: E-Learning Lab (virtual)*
 - 33 participants
 - Representatives from Toronto, Calgary, and Montreal Arts Councils were convened to share regional approaches and best practices providing the Working Group with a co-learning opportunity and exposure to other examples of arts awards programming.
 - The content largely explored the “why” of awards, and how awards could go beyond one-time recognition. Key insights included:
 - Awards should be entry points to ecosystems of support
 - The financial support can be life-changing for recipients
 - Mentorship, visibility tools, and alumni networks were identified as essential
 - Recognition must be equitable, sustained, and community-informed
- *June 11: Co-Creation Workshop*
 - 25 participants at Arts Court (*in-person*)
 - Participants translated values into practical ideas through MEL/Outcome Ladder exercises. Activities included mapping stakeholders, redesigning the process, and defining outcomes. These activities were framed around:
 - Interest-holders and beneficiaries
 - Experiential value of the “event”
 - Long-term or sustained impact
 - We also intended for this process to be beneficial to the Working Group by sharing a framework and methodology for this work.
 - Key ideas:
 - Recognition year-round through storytelling, digital assets, and artist spotlights
 - Support for artists: stipends, mentorship (by consent), and access to resources
 - Flexible, evolving categories and new award language
- *September 11: Assessment Criteria Committee (hybrid)*
 - 5 participants in-person (Arts Court, 3 virtual)
 - Committee members discussed and refined criteria for assessment evaluation and eligibility criteria. Outcomes included:
 - **Application process:**
 - Shift from artist to “creative” and to include organizations and businesses
 - Application to be in very plain language
 - “How do you see your art to work contributing to the creative community or building a community of support”?
 - Need to define “youth”
 - **Assessment process:**

- Organizations and businesses require a unique assessment rubric from artists
- Must live in Ottawa-Gatineau region (including Pikwakanagan and Kitigan Zibi First Nation communities) but civic impact can be measured beyond
- Consider Longevity of practice and impact, but not necessary
- Consider impact on community/civic life vs artist community (ie: how are we determining “community” through this language?)
- Assessment reflections:
 - Engagement: # people engaged and overall reach. Was the work/impact accessible, and what is the long-term social impact.
 - Capacity development: Did the nominee amplify marginalized voices? How available was there work to the public? Did it build capacity or skills?
 - Place-making: Did the nominee highlight or transform spaces or communities in meaningful ways? How long term is the impact?

GOALS AND OUTCOMES ESTABLISHED FOR AWARDS EVENT:

Vision: To celebrate and amplify the contributions of Ottawa-based artists and arts educators to a lively and prosperous city across disciplines, stages, and communities.

Awards nominations are open to:

- Non arts organizations that contribute to the arts
- Individuals
- collectives
- volunteer led organizations
- big and small organizations
- arts administrators
- community groups

Five Nominees are selected to be recognized for their work with an award. The work demonstrates **impact, achievements** and **contributions** to community through arts. There is no distinction between *emerging or established* artists. There could be sub-categories:

- Youth
- Organizations or groups
- Cross sectoral/disciplinary

Award recipients receive a monetary prize in addition to:

- Media kits and professional training

- Public profiling through AO to raise visibility and discoverability
- Year-long promotion and platforming
- Mentorship

TIMELINE/NEXT STEPS

- Finalize application form drafts for committee review and approval
- Finalize assessment rubric drafts for committee review and approval
- Continue sponsorship stewardship and engagement.
- Determine more in-kind sponsors to provide resources to recipients beyond cash (mentors, venues, consultants, headshots, etc)
- The Arts Awards application launch event November 12 in the Black Box Studio at Arts Court.
- Deadline for applications: December 11
- Peer Assessors will meet January 8, 2026
- We will reach out to all finalists (winners & runners up). Winners will be announced live at the awards ceremony. Part of the application will confirm they are available to attend the awards in person (a must to qualify as a winner) and we will ask what kind of support they would like to see as part of the awards
- The formal Awards ceremony will be on February 5, 2026, in the Fourth Stage at Canada's National Arts Centre.