

WILLIAM NOTMAN THEN AND NOW

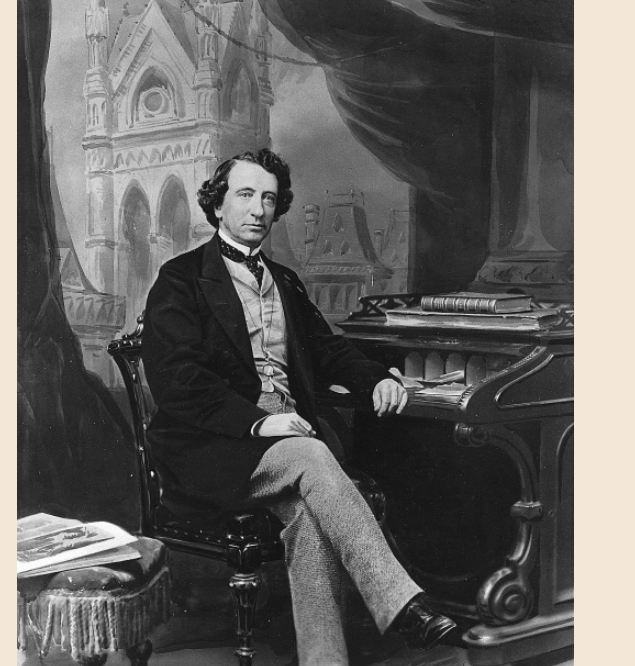
*Canada's first internationally famed photographer,
Montreal-based William Notman was a pioneer of Canadian
image making whose iconic works continue to inspire artists today.*



In her publication *William Notman: Life & Work*, Art Canada Institute author Sarah Parsons explores the career of Canada's first internationally known photographer. Born in 1826 and raised in Scotland, Notman settled in Montreal in 1856 and quickly made a name for himself. He attracted prominent business and political figures, high society women, and celebrities to his elegant and fashionable studios, and gained global acclaim for his ambitious composite pictures and inventive scenes. As a prolific and important figure of early photography in Canada, Notman has had a profound influence on our nation's art and identity. In honour of the 195th anniversary of Notman's birth earlier this week on March 8, we are revisiting his work, situating it alongside contemporary images, and looking at its enduring impact.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE SPECTACLE OF WINTER



William Notman, *Caribou Hunting, The Chance Shot*, Montreal, 1866, McCord Museum



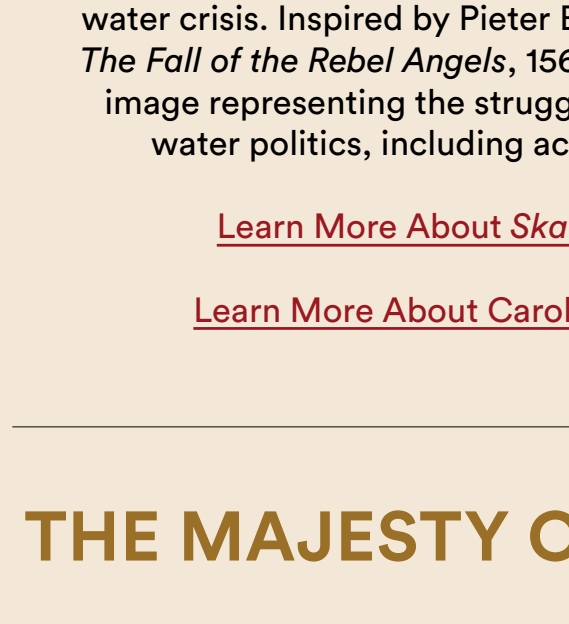
Greg McCarthy, *Clean Up (After William Notman)*, 2015

Created in his studio, Notman's staged winter scenes delighted viewers with their realism and brought him international renown. In the iconic *Caribou Hunting, The Chance Shot*, 1866 (left), a man crouching in the snow aims his rifle at his prey while his guide quietly advises him. Notman and his team of artists created the snow by fluffing lambs-wool and capturing it slightly out of focus. The hunter is William Rhodes, a landowner and politician who commissioned the *Caribou Hunting* series, while the guide is played by one of Notman's employees. In the photograph *Clean Up (After William Notman)*, 2015, Toronto-based artist Greg McCarthy documents his alteration and restaging of a Notman image of a snowshoer, highlighting the artificial and romanticized nature of Notman's pictures and reassessing their significance as representations of Canadian national identity.

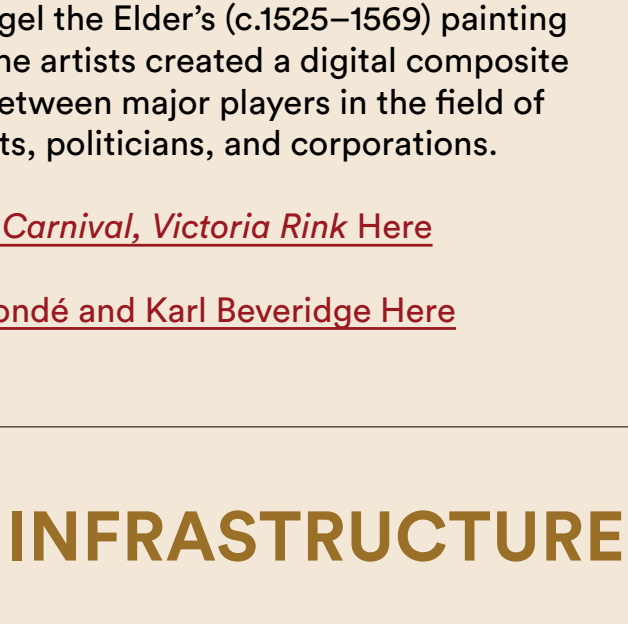
[Learn More About Caribou Hunting, The Chance Shot Here](#)

[Learn More About Greg McCarthy Here](#)

THE POWER OF POLITICAL PORTRAITURE



William Notman, *Sir John A. Macdonald*, Ottawa, 1869, McCord Museum

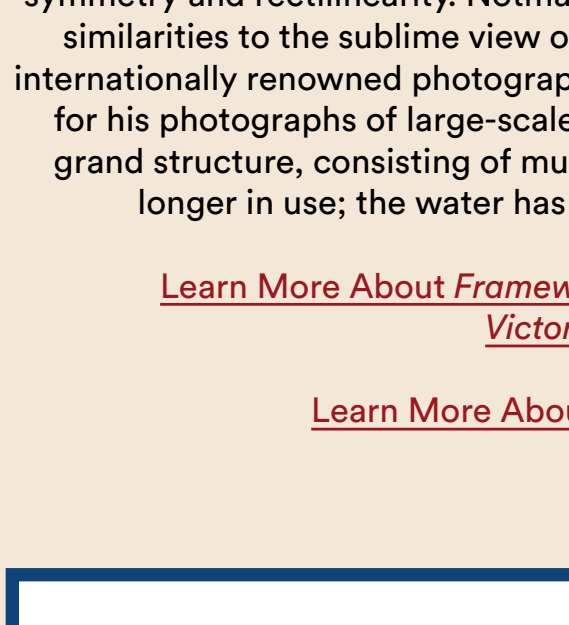


Yousuf Karsh, *Winston Churchill*, December 30, 1941, National Gallery of Canada

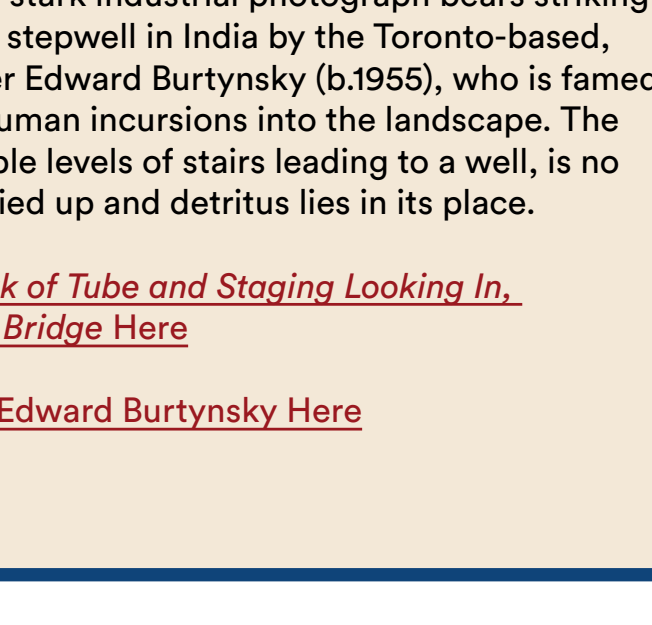
Not only was Notman a talented photographer, but he was also an exceedingly savvy entrepreneur who attracted a clientele composed of the country's business and political elite—including, notably, the first prime minister, Sir John A. Macdonald. For this portrait (left), taken two years after Confederation at his new Ottawa studio, Notman makes use of props and a painted backdrop to frame the identity of his sitter. Macdonald is seated at a desk, seemingly taking a brief pause from his work to have his photograph taken, while the background offers a view of the parliamentary buildings outside. Seven decades later, Yousuf Karsh (1908–2002), an Armenian Canadian photographer who similarly captured notable figures, photographed British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on Parliament Hill, producing one of the most celebrated works in the history of photography.

[Learn More About Yousuf Karsh Here](#)

COMPOSITIONAL GENIUSES



William Notman, *Skating Carnival, Victoria Rink*, Montreal, 1870, McCord Museum



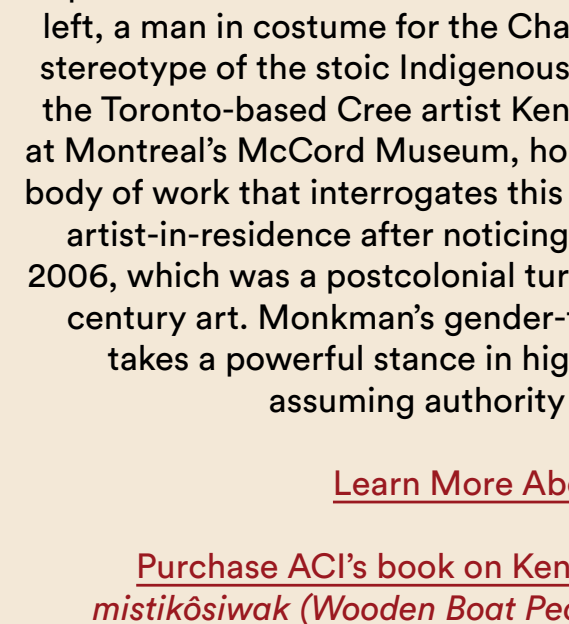
Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge, *Fall of Water* (detail), 2007

Skating Carnival, Victoria Rink, 1870 (left), created by combining over three hundred individual photographs into a single image, was Notman's most ambitious achievement in composite photography, a technique he is credited with developing and popularizing. Figures dressed in elaborate costumes are gathered at a large skating rink during an event honouring Britain's Prince Arthur, who was visiting Montreal. In *The Fall of Water*, 2007, the artistic duo Carole Condé (b.1940) and Karl Beveridge (b.1945) employ composite photography to address a far more serious contemporary concern: the global water crisis. Inspired by Pieter Bruegel the Elder's (c.1525–1569) painting *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 1562, the artists created a digital composite image representing the struggle between major players in the field of water politics, including activists, politicians, and corporations.

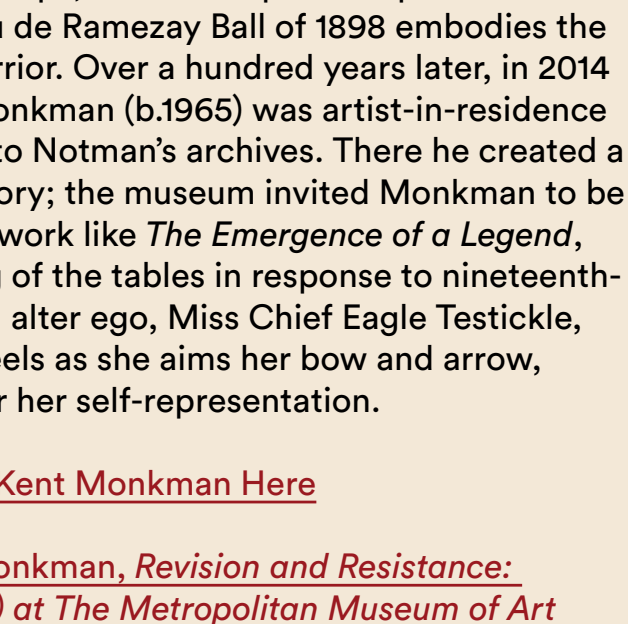
[Learn More About Skating Carnival, Victoria Rink Here](#)

[Learn More About Carole Condé and Karl Beveridge Here](#)

THE MAJESTY OF INFRASTRUCTURE



William Notman, *Framework of Tube and Staging Looking In, Victoria Bridge*, Montreal, 1859, McCord Museum



Edward Burtynsky, *Stepwell #4, Sagar Kund Baori, Bundi, Rajasthan, India*, 2010, Nicholas Metvier Gallery

Skilled at a wide range of photographic styles, Notman employs a stunningly modern, industrial aesthetic in his shot of Montreal's Victoria Bridge during its construction in 1859 (left). The longest covered bridge in the world at the time, the Victoria Bridge connected Quebec by rail to the eastern seaboard cities of Boston and New York. The tight framing of Notman's image emphasizes not only the structure's monumental size, but also its aesthetic qualities, particularly its symmetry and rectilinearity. Notman's stark industrial photograph bears striking similarities to the sublime view of a stepwell in India by the Toronto-based, internationally renowned photographer Edward Burtynsky (b.1955), who is famed for his photographs of large-scale human incursions into the landscape. The grand structure, consisting of multiple levels of stairs leading to a well, is no longer in use; the water has dried up and detritus lies in its place.

[Learn More About Framework of Tube and Staging Looking In, Victoria Bridge Here](#)

[Learn More About Edward Burtynsky Here](#)

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PERFORMING FOR THE CAMERA



William Notman, *M. de Blois Thiboudeau, Costumed for Chateau de Ramezay Ball*, Montreal, 1898, McCord Museum



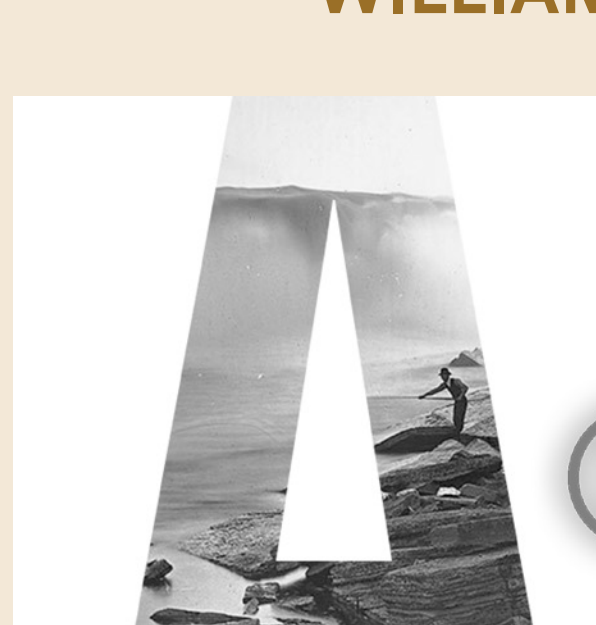
Kent Monkman, *The Emergence of a Legend* (one in a series of five photographs), 2006

According to author Sarah Parsons, Notman possessed a keen understanding of "the studio as a space for identity performance," where sitters could present the best versions of themselves before the camera or take on a variety of personas with the aid of costumes, props, and makeup. In the portrait on the left, a man in costume for the Chateau de Ramezay Ball of 1898 embodies the stereotype of the stoic Indigenous warrior. Over a hundred years later, in 2014 the Toronto-based Cree artist Kent Monkman (b.1965) was artist-in-residence at Montreal's McCord Museum, home to Notman's archives. There he created a body of work that interrogates this history; the museum invited Monkman to be artist-in-residence after noticing his work like *The Emergence of a Legend*, 2006, which was a postcolonial turning of the tables in response to nineteenth-century art. Monkman's gender-fluid alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, takes a powerful stance in high heels as she aims her bow and arrow, assuming authority over her self-representation.

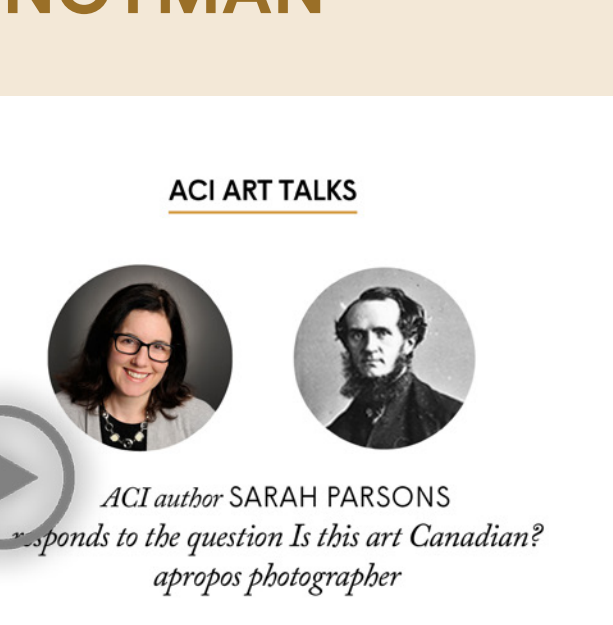
[Learn More About Kent Monkman Here](#)

[Purchase ACI's book on Kent Monkman, Revision and Resistance: mistikôsiwak \(Wooden Boat People\) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

CONTEMPORARY BEAUTIES



William Notman, *Miss Evans and Friends*, Montreal, 1887, McCord Museum

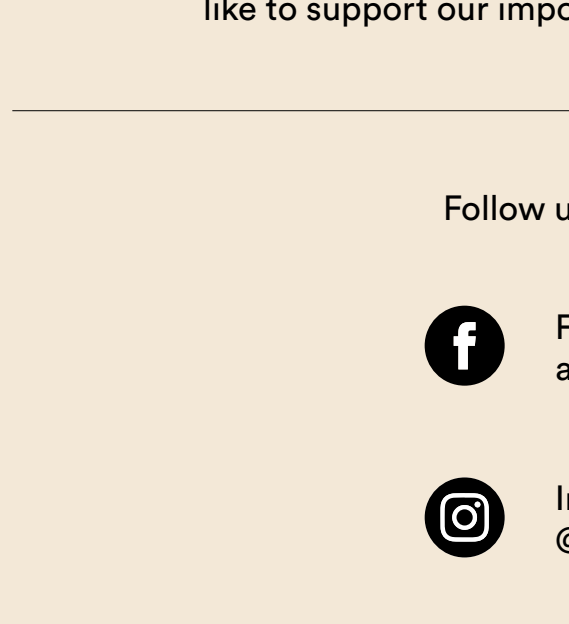


Marisa Portolese, *Ashley, Roxanne, Yulia*, 2018

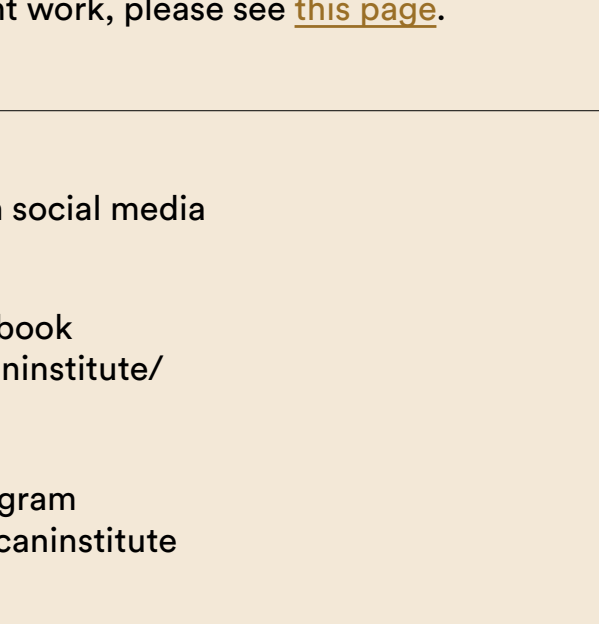
In Notman's elegant *Miss Evans and Friends*, 1887 (left), three young women are having tea in their finest gowns, reflecting prevailing ideals of bourgeois femininity. In keeping with nineteenth-century values, many of Notman's portraits of high society women depict them in a manner that emphasizes their beauty and social status. Inspired by Notman's *Miss Evans and Friends*, Montreal-based artist Marisa Portolese (b.1969) created a group portrait of three of her former students, dressed in unembellished pastel dresses, at Mount Royal Park. This work is part of the series *Belle de Jour III*, 2016–ongoing, featuring photographs of everyday women that respond to Notman's portraits and engage with past and present beauty standards.

[Learn More About Marisa Portolese Here](#)

A LEGACY TO CHALLENGE



William Notman & Son, *Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill*, Montreal, 1885, McCord Museum



Jeff Thomas, *Buffalo Dancer at the Samuel de Champlain Monument, Ottawa, #4*, 2003

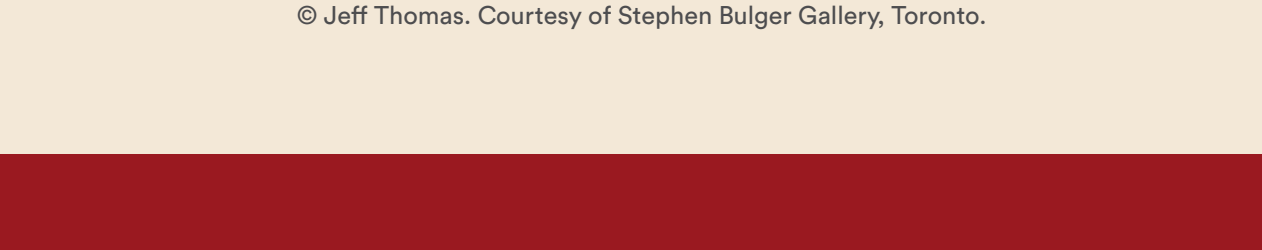
Among the many celebrities that Notman photographed were Buffalo Bill and Sitting Bull (a Hunkpapa Lakota Sioux chief known to his people as Tatanka Iyotake), key figures in Buffalo Bill's Wild West, an annual vaudeville travelling show. When Buffalo Bill made a stop in Montreal in 1885, Notman sought to capitalize on the popularity by inviting the stars to a session in his studio, which resulted in the portrait on the left, of Bill and Sitting Bull posing in full regalia. Ottawa-based Iroquois artist Jeff Thomas (b.1956) references touring performances like this one through the plastic Indian figures he incorporates into his street photographs in the series *Indians on Tour*, 2000–18. In his work on the right, an Indian plastic figure stands in front of a statue of Samuel de Champlain. Through images like this one, Thomas reflects on popular Indigenous stereotypes and his own experiences as a self-described "urban Iroquois."

[Learn More About Sitting Bull and Buffalo Bill Here](#)

[Learn More About Jeff Thomas Here](#)

Jeff Thomas: Life & Work by Rhéanne Chartrand is one of the Art Canada Institute's upcoming titles.

WATCH SARAH PARSONS ON WILLIAM NOTMAN



Watch this video of author Sarah Parsons discussing how Notman arrived in Canada from Scotland in the mid-1850s and quickly established himself as Montreal's leading photographer.

[Watch Here](#)

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PAST NEWSLETTERS

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