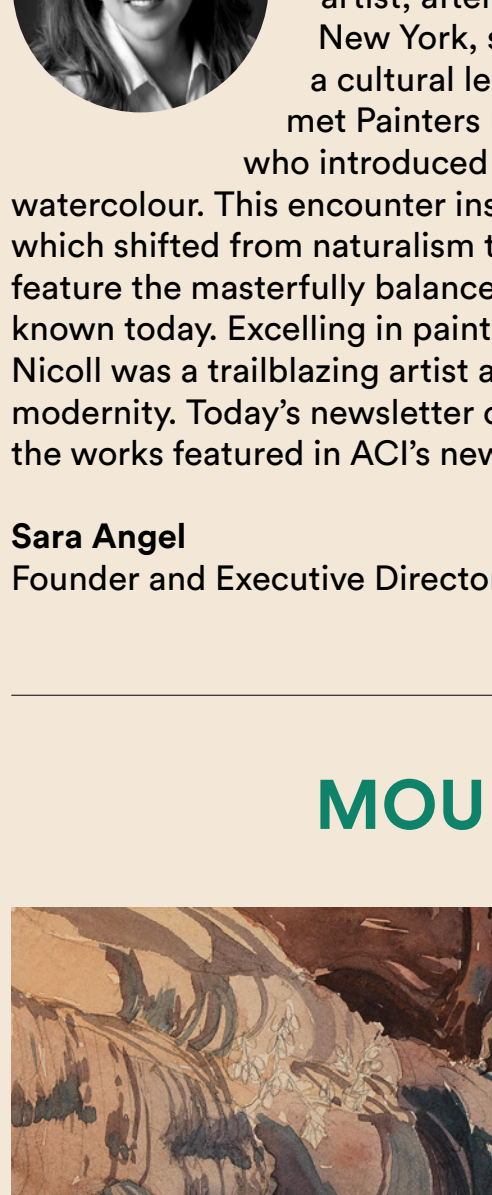


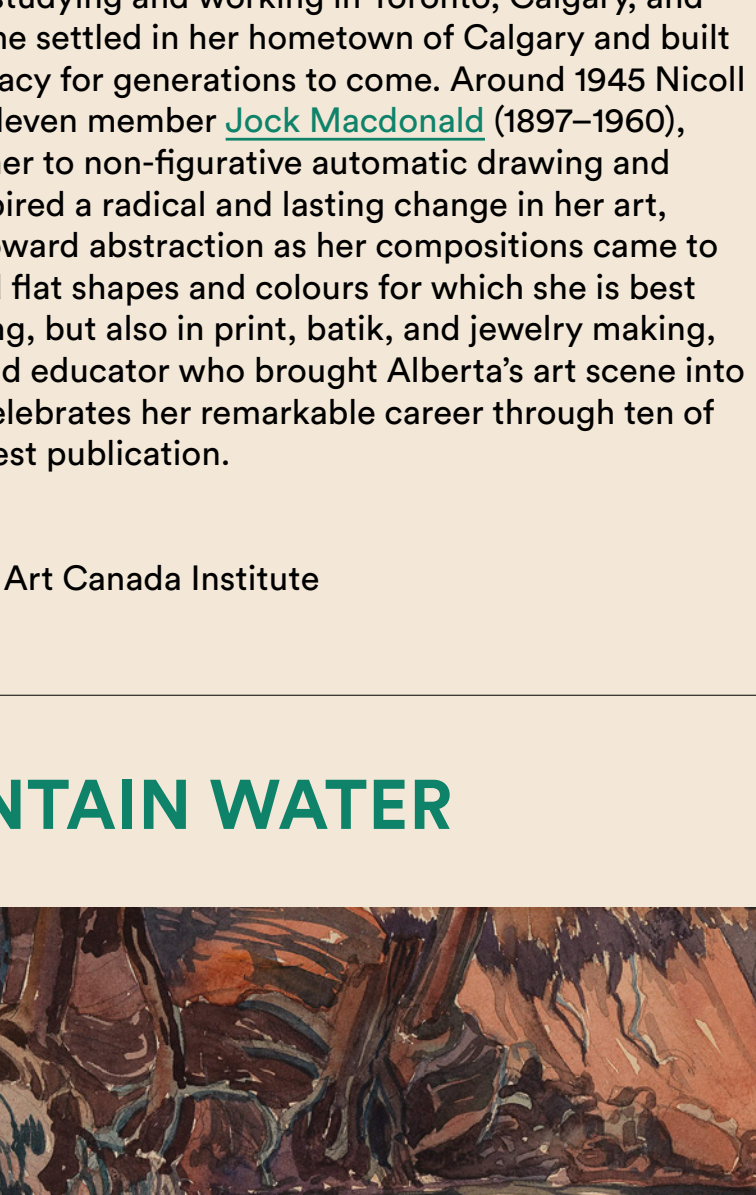
NOVEMBER 25, 2022

CALGARY'S TRAILBLAZING MODERNIST ACI'S NEWEST PUBLICATION ON THE ART OF MARION NICOLL

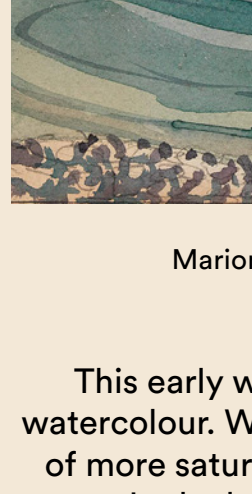
*Marion Nicoll challenged gender norms and conservative attitudes in Calgary to usher in a modernist era with her innovative abstract paintings. Today the Art Canada Institute celebrates the publication of **Marion Nicoll: Life & Work** by Catharine Mastin, which explores the artist's extraordinary legacy.*



Portrait of Marion Nicoll,
date unknown.



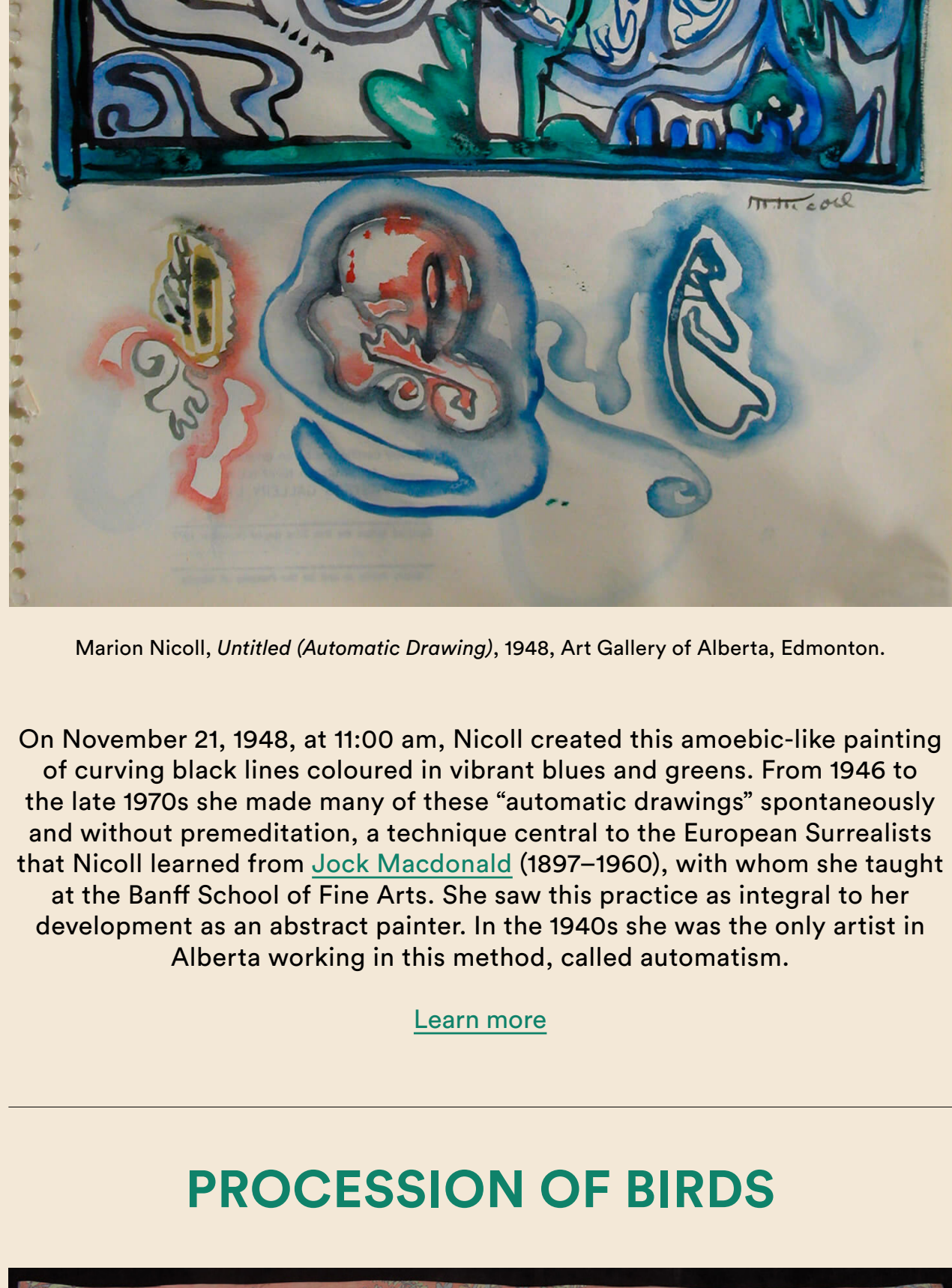
Marion Nicoll, *August Heat*, 1957,
Private Collection, Mississauga.



Mid-twentieth-century Alberta was an isolated and male-dominated creative community that met its match in Marion Nicoll (1909–1985). From childhood, Nicoll wanted to be an artist; after studying and working in Toronto, Calgary, and New York, she settled in her hometown of Calgary and built a cultural legacy for generations to come. Around 1945 Nicoll met painters Eleven member Jack Macdonald (1897–1960), who introduced her to non-figurative automatic drawing and watercolour. This encounter inspired a radical and lasting change in her art, which shifted from naturalism toward abstraction as her compositions came to feature the masterfully balanced flat shapes and colours for which she is best known today. Excelling in painting, but also in print, batik, and jewelry making, Nicoll was a trailblazing artist and educator who brought Alberta's art scene into modernity. Today's newsletter celebrates her remarkable career through ten of the works featured in ACI's newest publication.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

MOUNTAIN WATER

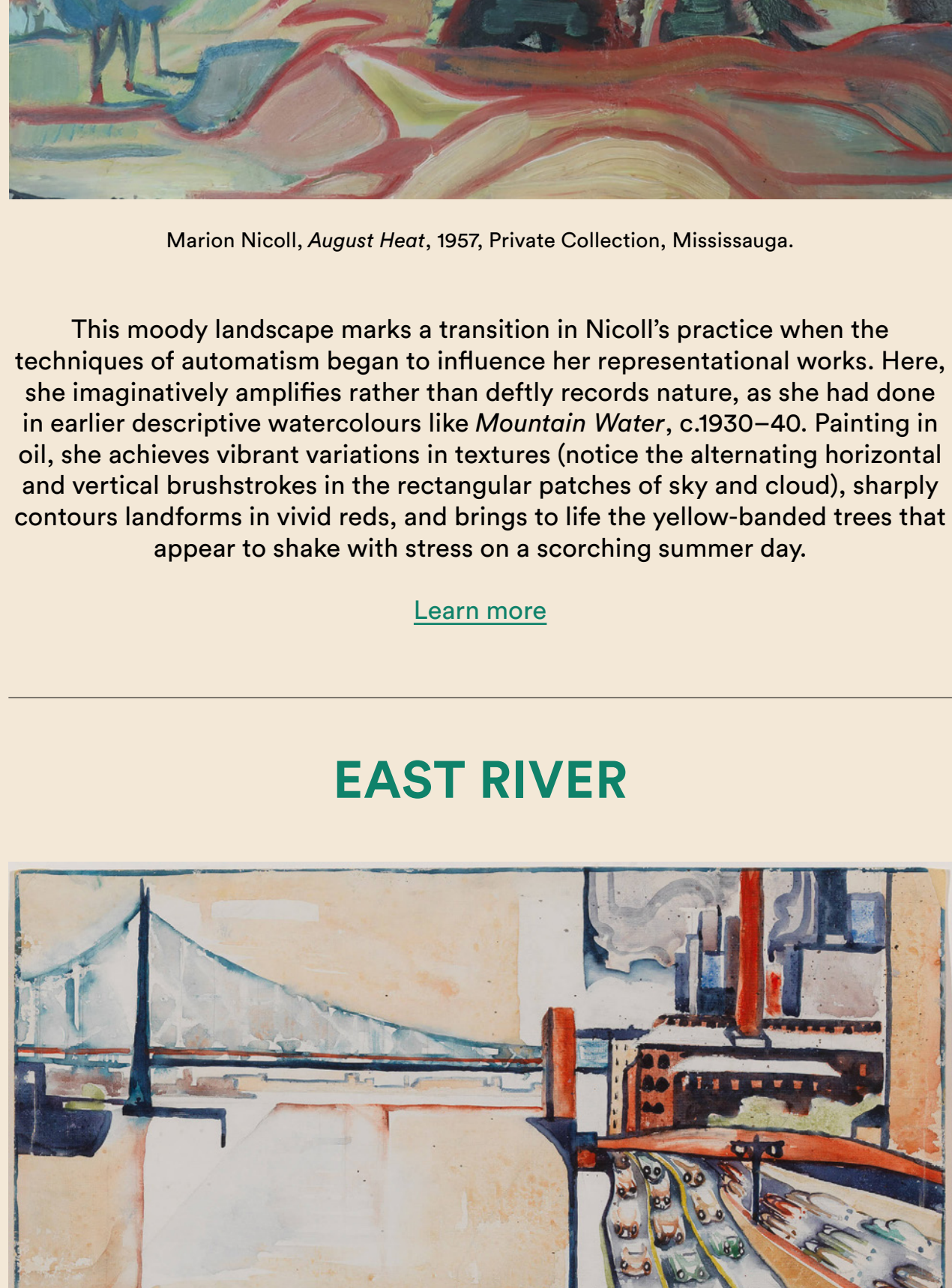


Marion Mackay, *Mountain Water*, c.1930–40, Glenbow Museum, Calgary.

This early work demonstrates Nicoll's prodigious ability to paint nature in watercolour. Washes of blue and ochre are expertly overlaid with repeated lines of more saturated pigment to suggest a turbulent stream, rocks, and roots of trees. In the late 1920s Nicoll moved to Toronto to study under the Group of Seven landscape artists before returning to Calgary to learn from British painter A.C. Leighton (1901–1965). Calgary's cultural community was dominated by a small group of men, but Nicoll's talents were beginning to be recognized. In 1936 *Mountain Water* was exhibited at the National Gallery of Canada, providing a great boost of confidence to the young artist.

[Learn more](#)

UNTITLED (AUTOMATIC DRAWING)

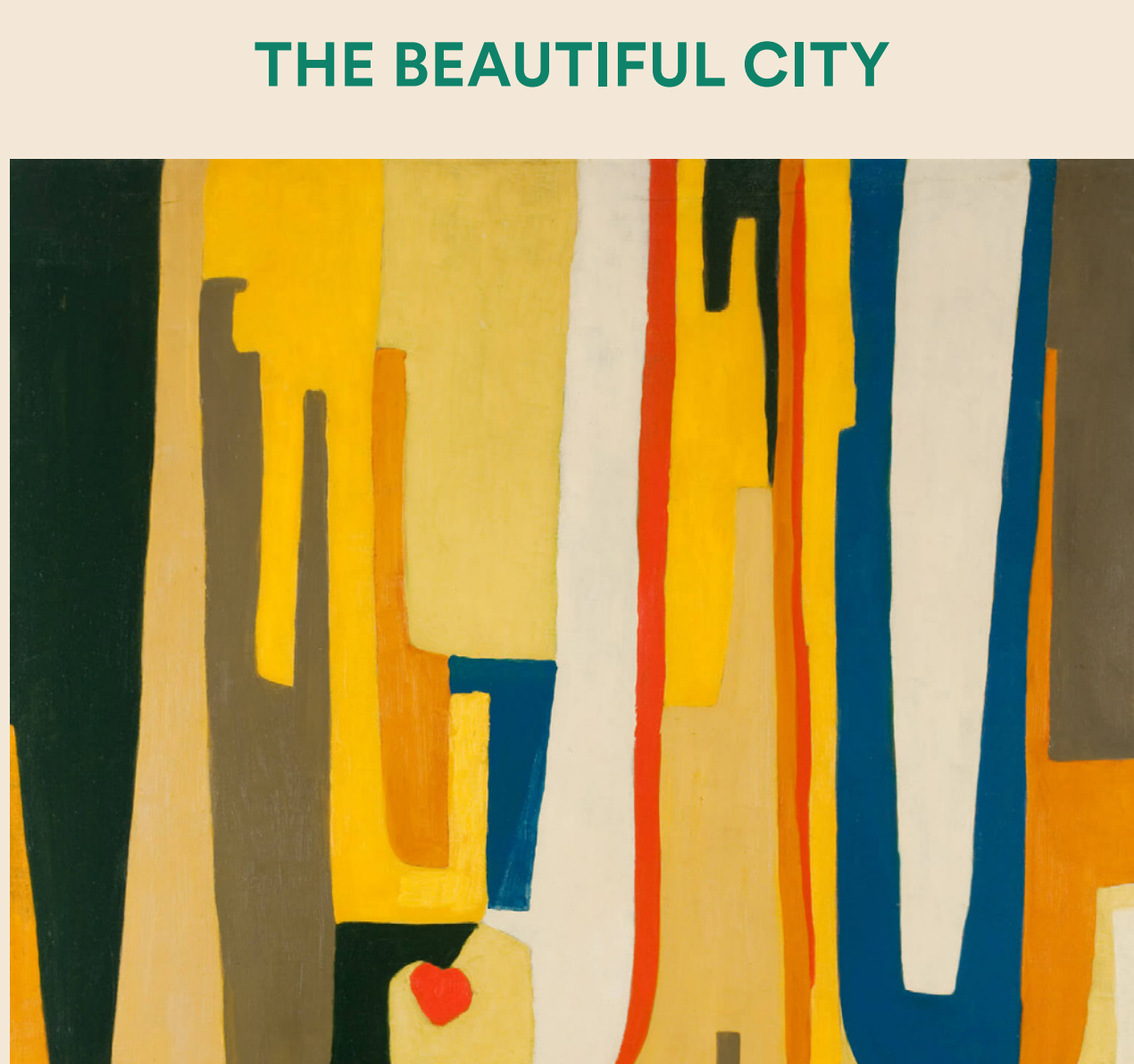


Marion Nicoll, *Untitled (Automatic Drawing)*, 1948, Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton.

On November 21, 1948, at 11:00 am, Nicoll created this amoebic-like painting of curving black lines coloured in vibrant blues and greens. From 1946 to the late 1970s she made many of these "automatic drawings" spontaneously and without premeditation, a technique central to the European Surrealists that Nicoll learned from Jack Macdonald (1897–1960), with whom she taught at the Banff School of Fine Arts. She saw this practice as integral to her development as an abstract painter. In the 1940s she was the only artist in Alberta working in this method, called automatism.

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PROCESSION OF BIRDS

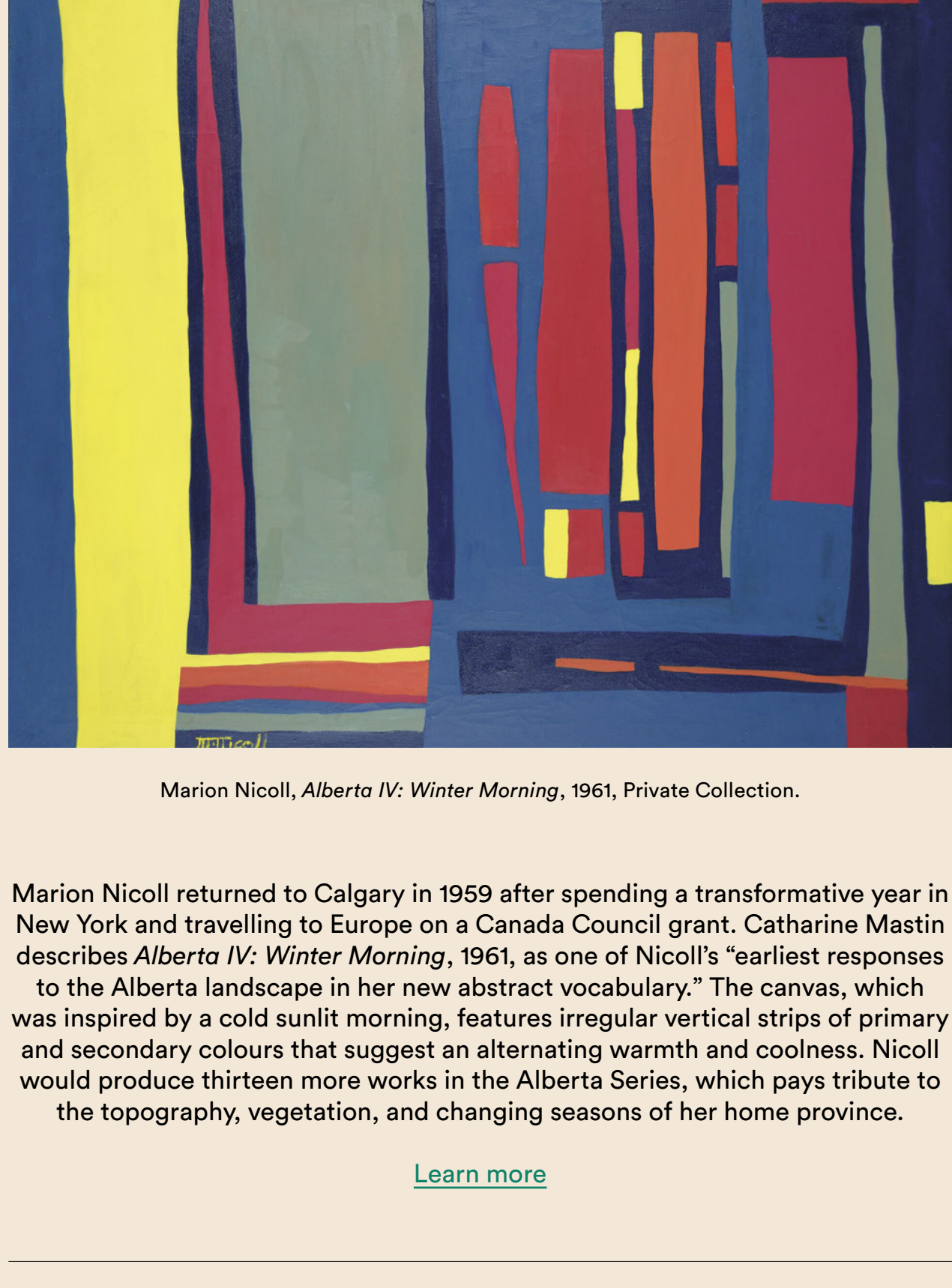


Marion Nicoll, *Procession of Birds*, 1956, Glenbow Museum, Calgary.

As Catharine Mastin writes, "by the 1950s, Nicoll was considered an expert on the ancient Javanese practice of creating designs in wax resist on fabrics, known as batik." In this fanciful example—for which she won a top prize in a Quebec exhibition—"she features a parade of playful birds posing along the length of the silk. While Jack Macdonald (1897–1960) had introduced her to automatism, Nicoll taught Macdonald the batik technique. In 1953 the Government of Alberta commissioned a how-to manual from the artist because she was so widely respected for her knowledge on the subject.

[Learn more](#)

AUGUST HEAT

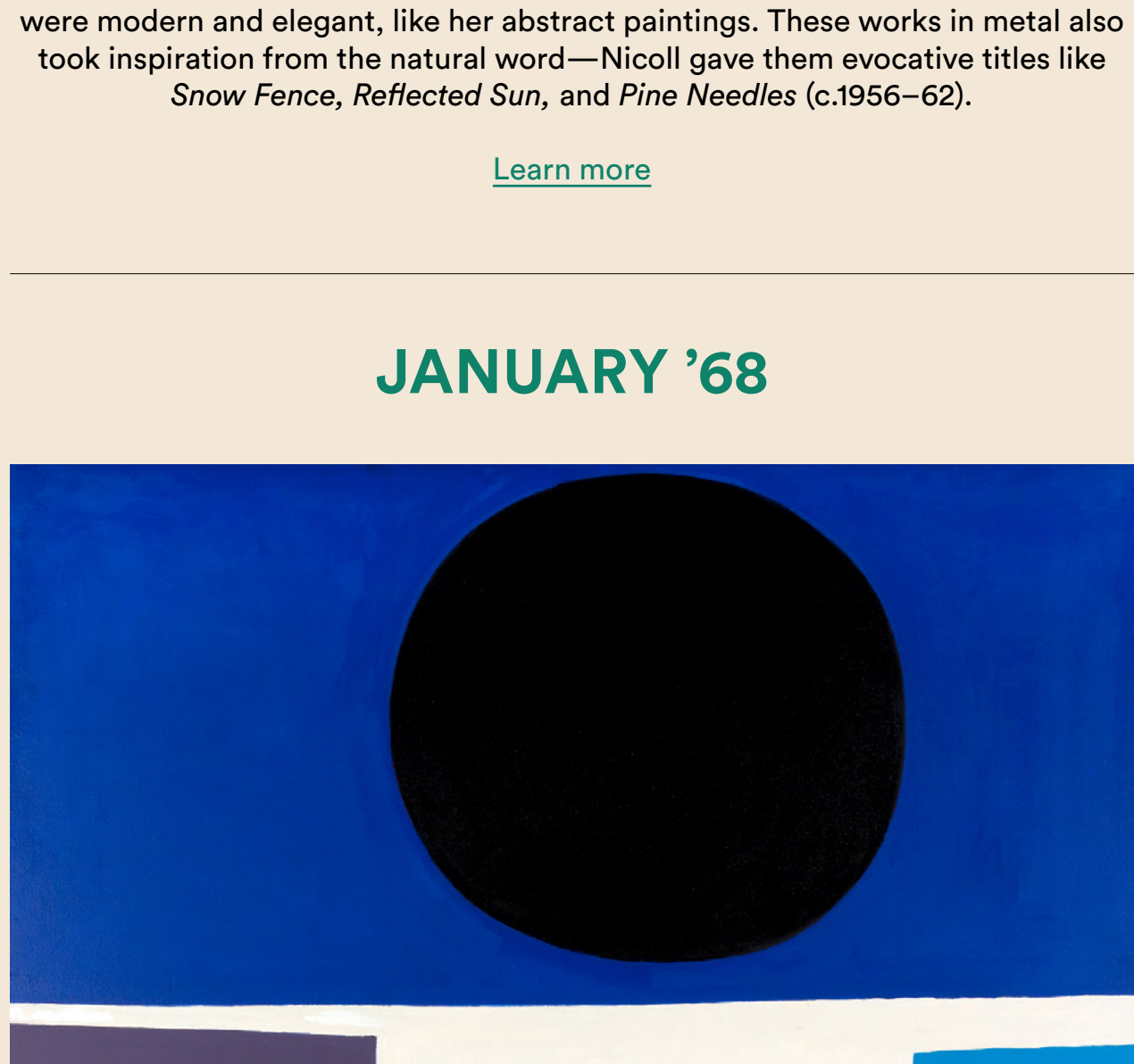


Marion Nicoll, *August Heat*, 1957, Private Collection, Mississauga.

This moody landscape marks a transition in Nicoll's practice when the techniques of automatism began to influence her representational work. Here, she imaginatively amplifies rather than deftly records nature, as she had done in earlier descriptive watercolours like *Mountain Water*, c.1930–40. Painting in oil, she achieves vibrant variations in textures (notice the alternating horizontal and vertical brushstrokes in the rectangular patches of sky and cloud), sharply contours landforms in vivid reds, and brings to life the yellow-banded trees that appear to shake with stress on a scorching summer day.

[Learn more](#)

EAST RIVER



Marion Nicoll, *East River*, 1958, Private Collection.

In the summer of 1957 Nicoll's approach to painting changed radically after she attended the Emma Lake Artists' Workshops in Saskatchewan. There, she studied with American artist Will Barnett (1911–2012) whose flattened, geometric works inspired her to look at the world anew. In 1958 she moved to New York, where she continued to engage in the abstract painting movement, including Abstract Expressionism. The watercolour *East River* illustrates the transition in her work from naturalism toward abstraction. The subject and space are evident on the right, but the water and bridge on the left are simplified to the most basic of forms.

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THE BEAUTIFUL CITY

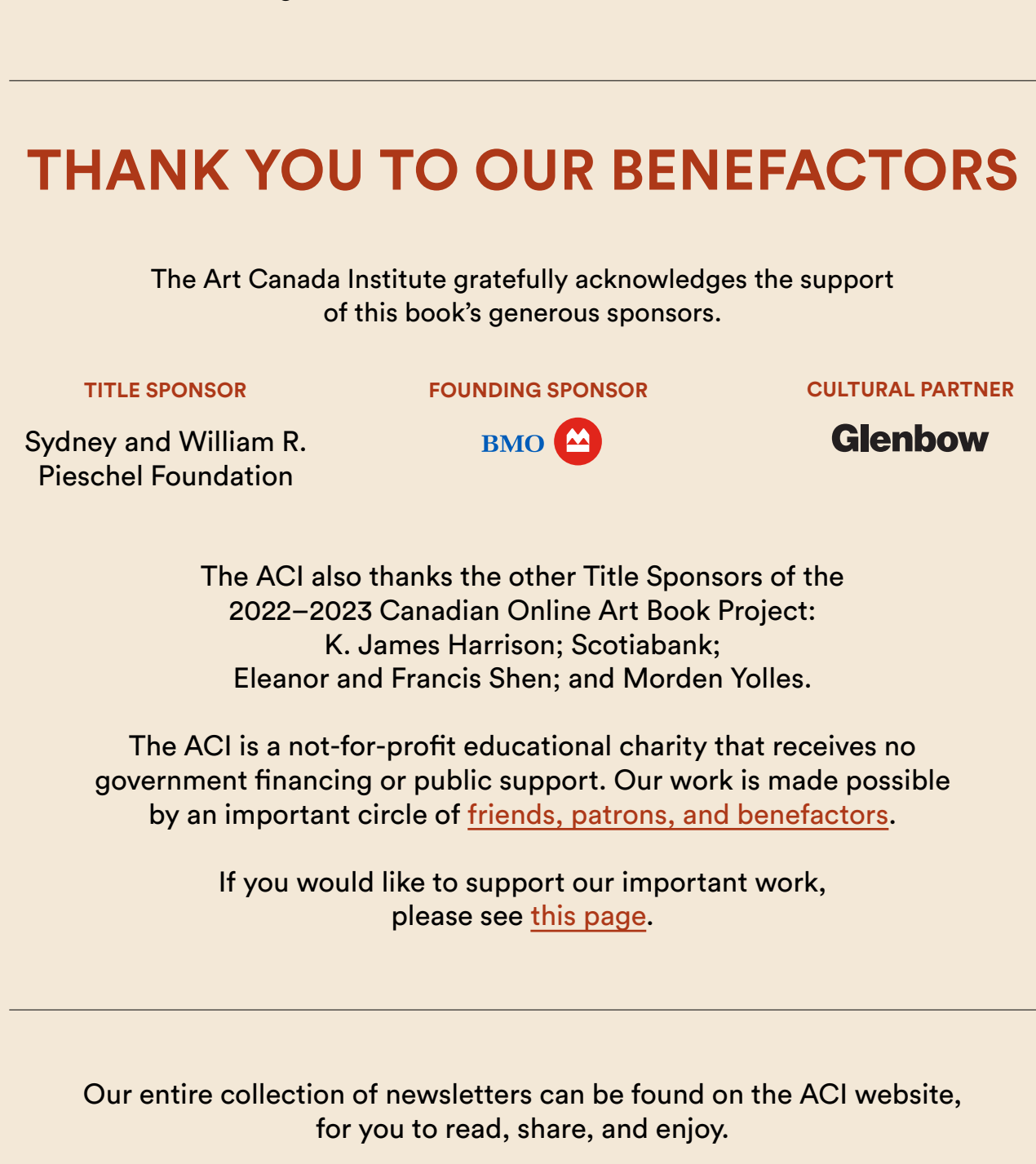


The Beautiful City, 1959, Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver.

The Beautiful City is a painting of New York, but the buildings, lights, and life of the metropolis have been transformed into a dynamic arrangement of colour, line, and shape. Nicoll's time in Manhattan inspired her move from naturalism to hard-edge painting, wherein well-defined areas of colour complete an abstract composition. She was reinvigorated by this new means of visual expression. "My hunger to paint has been insatiable.... Isn't it odd that the training I've had has become an obstacle to be jumped before I could paint," she wrote to a friend the same year this work was created.

[Learn more](#)

ALBERTA IV: WINTER MORNING

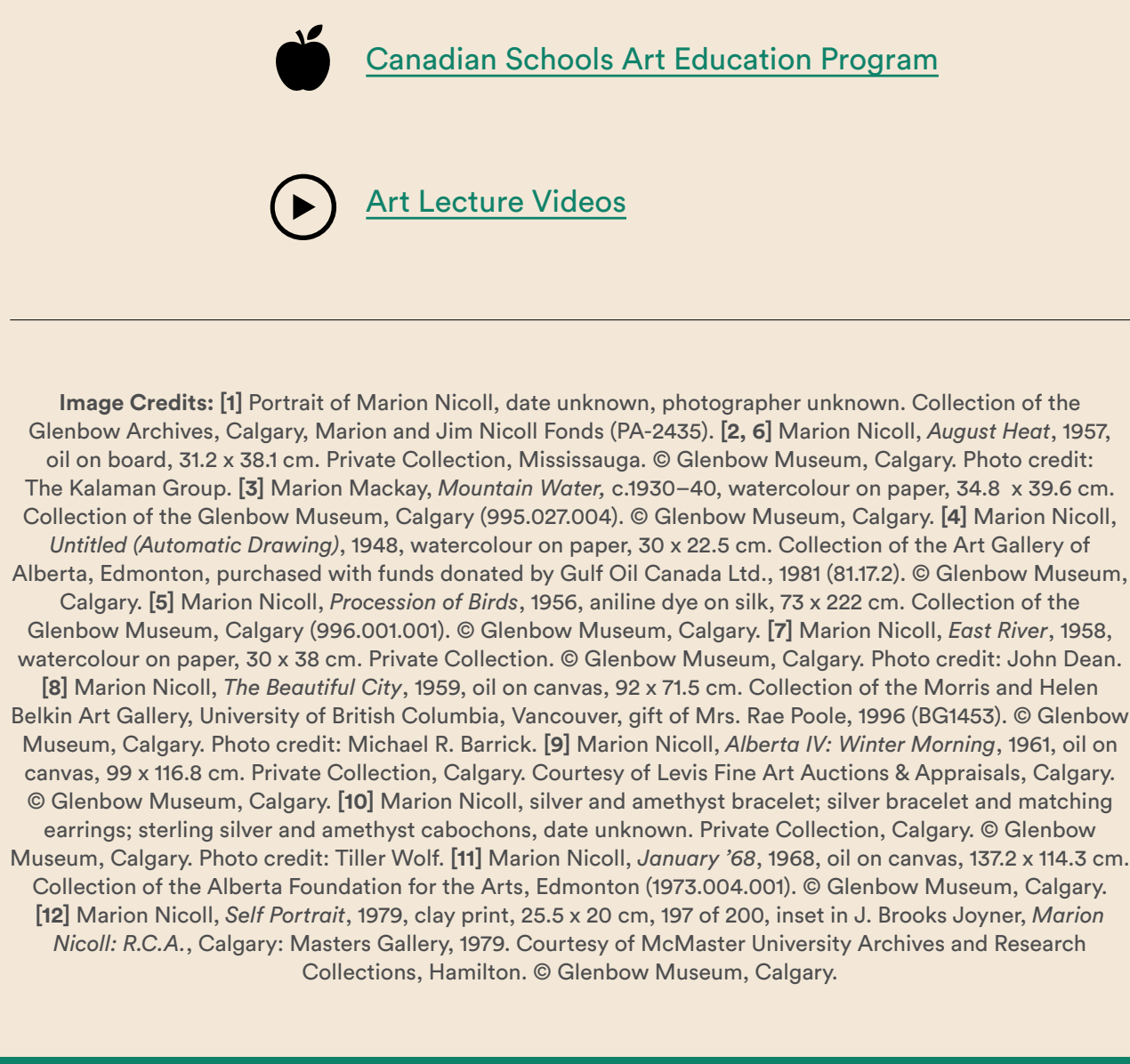


Marion Nicoll, *Alberta IV: Winter Morning*, 1961, Private Collection.

Marion Nicoll returned to Calgary in 1959 after spending a transformative year in New York and travelling to Europe on a Canada Council grant. Catharine Mastin describes *Alberta IV: Winter Morning*, 1961, as one of Nicoll's "earliest responses to the Alberta landscape in her new abstract vocabulary." These works in metal were inspired by a cold sunlit morning, features irregular vertical strips of primary and secondary colours that suggest an alternating warmth and coolness. Nicoll would produce thirteen more works in the *Alberta Series*, which pays tribute to the topography, vegetation, and changing seasons of her home province.

[Learn more](#)

SCULPTURE TO WEAR



Marion Nicoll, silver and amethyst bracelet; silver bracelet and matching earrings; sterling silver and amethyst cabochons, date unknown, Private Collection.

Nicoll is best known for her colourful paintings, prints, and batiks, but she also created exquisite "wearable art," as she called it, in the form of jewelry. She studied with silversmith J. Christjansen in Vancouver in 1956 and went on to design bracelets, earrings, rings, and pendants, which can now only be found in private collections. In the 1960s they were highly prized and exhibited in craft exhibitions in Canada and internationally. The pieces, such as those seen here, were modern and elegant, like her abstract paintings. These works in metal took inspiration from the natural world—Nicoll gave them evocative titles like *Snow Fence*, *Reflected Sun*, and *Pine Needles* (c.1956–62).

[Learn more](#)

JANUARY '68

Marion Nicoll, *January '68*, 1968, Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Edmonton.

Here Nicoll has reduced her forms to the most minimal of geometries. A large black circle rests atop a white central area flanked by purple and blue. Catharine Mastin sees "an outstretched torso set in a barren landscape," which might stand as a "symbolic metaphor for Marion Nicoll's aching body in Alberta's cold January." In her later years the artist suffered from rheumatoid arthritis, which was most painful during the winter months. In 1968 she nevertheless made three brilliant new abstractions in response to this brutal season, the first of which was *January '68*. The work dazzled American curator William Seitz, who admired the "philosophical and poetic nourishment" that Nicoll's paintings provided.

[Learn more](#)

SELF PORTRAIT

Marion Nicoll, *Self Portrait*, 1979, McMaster University Archives and Research Collections, Hamilton.

In 1971, when she was just sixty-three, Nicoll's advancing arthritis forced her to give up her painting practice. Despite a long career in art, she had only recently discovered the hard-edge style of abstract painting for which she wanted to be remembered. While she could no longer stand before her easel, Nicoll's tenacious creative spirit found other means of expression; she continued to draw and make prints when her body allowed. The clay print *Self Portrait*, 1979, is among her last known creations, made to accompany the very first monograph on her life and art, *Marion Nicoll: R.C.A.* (1979). It referenced an equally abstract self-portrait she had painted in New York in 1959 when she had finally found the voice that would be her most important artistic legacy.

[Learn more](#)

About the Author of *Marion Nicoll: Life & Work*

Catharine Mastin is an independent scholar and curator with specialization in modern art and feminism and is an Adjunct Member of the Faculty of Graduate Studies in Art History at York University, Toronto. She received her PhD from the University of Alberta, Edmonton, in 2012 on women in artist-couple relationships. Elements of her doctoral research have been published in *Mary Pratt* (2013, 2nd edition 2016) and *Uninvited: Women in the Modern Moment* (2021). Mastin states, "Marion Nicoll was one of six women included in my dissertation on women in artist-couples and I chose to write *Marion Nicoll: Life & Work* because of the artist's foundational role in advancing the cause of abstract art in Western Canada and Nicoll's pivotal role as an educator in mentoring women."

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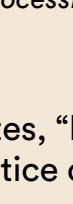
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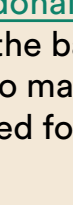
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