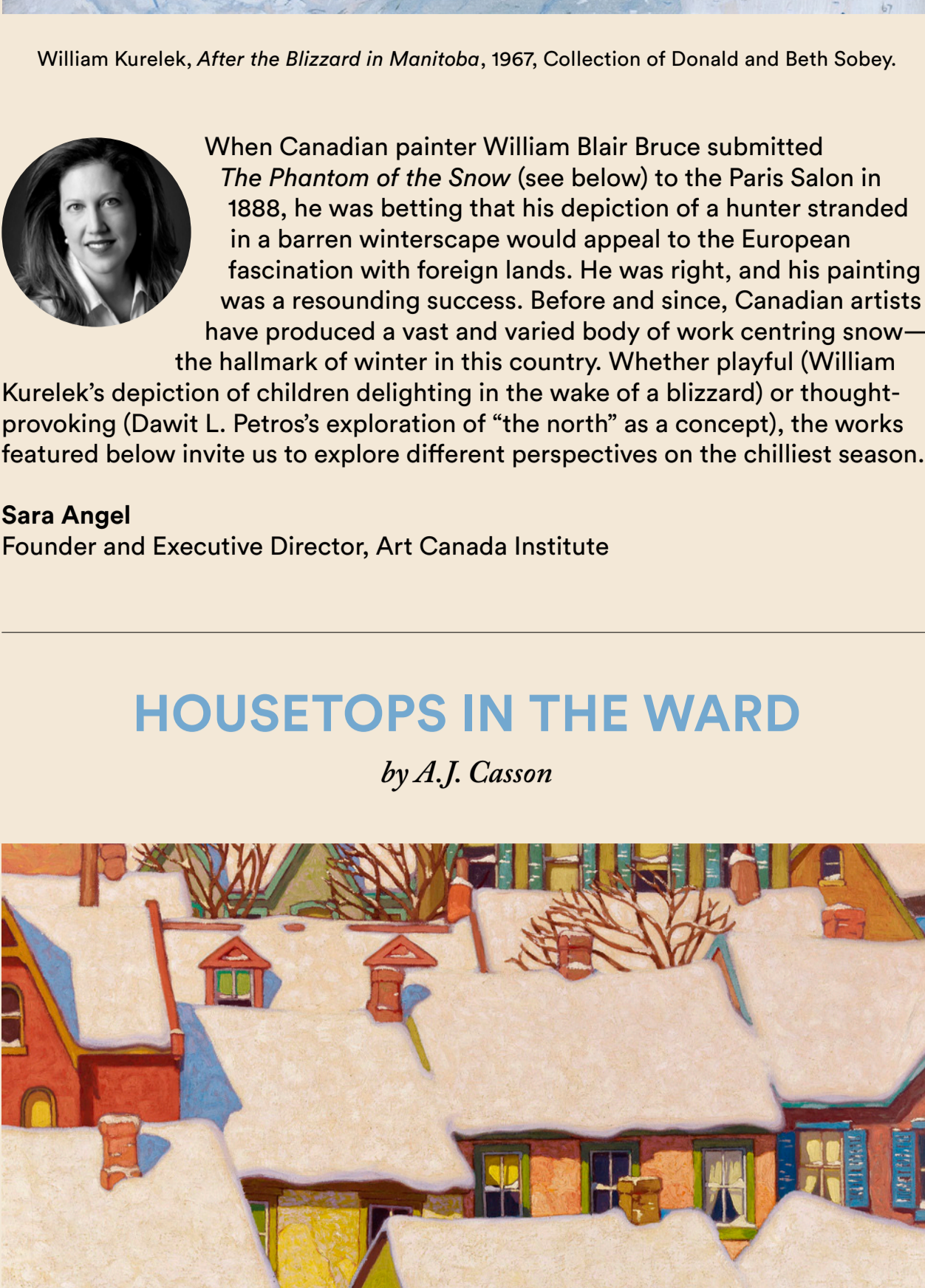


FEBRUARY 17, 2023

# THE BIG CHILL SNOW IN CANADIAN ART

*For centuries, artists have depicted snow in all its forms as an indelible part of the Canadian winter landscape.*



William Kurelek, *After the Blizzard in Manitoba*, 1967, Collection of Donald and Beth Sobey.



When Canadian painter William Blair Bruce submitted *The Phantom of the Snow* (see below) to the Paris Salon in 1888, he was betting that his depiction of a hunter stranded in a barren winterscape would appeal to the European fascination with foreign lands. He was right, and his painting was a resounding success. Before and since, Canadian artists have produced a vast and varied body of work centring snow—the hallmark of winter in this country. Whether playful (William Kurelek's depiction of children delighting in the wake of a blizzard) or thought-provoking (Dawit L. Petros's exploration of "the north" as a concept), the works featured below invite us to explore different perspectives on the chilliest season.

**Sara Angel**  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## HOUSETOPS IN THE WARD

by *A.J. Casson*



Alfred Joseph Casson, *Housetops in the Ward*, c.1924, The Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Brightly coloured row houses stand in striking contrast to freshly fallen snow in A.J. Casson's (1898–1992) depiction of the Ward, a former Toronto neighbourhood that was home to new immigrants and refugees in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The tightly packed rows of white roofs highlight the Group of Seven member's keen sense of design and interest in urban architecture. Casson's paintings were strongly influenced by his work as a commercial designer, during which time he apprenticed with Franklin Carmichael, who would invite him to join the Group of Seven in 1926 after Frank Johnston's departure.

[Learn more about A.J. Casson](#)

## 033-1585

by *Kananginak Pootoogook*



Kananginak Pootoogook, *033-1585*, 2004–5, courtesy of Dorset Fine Arts.

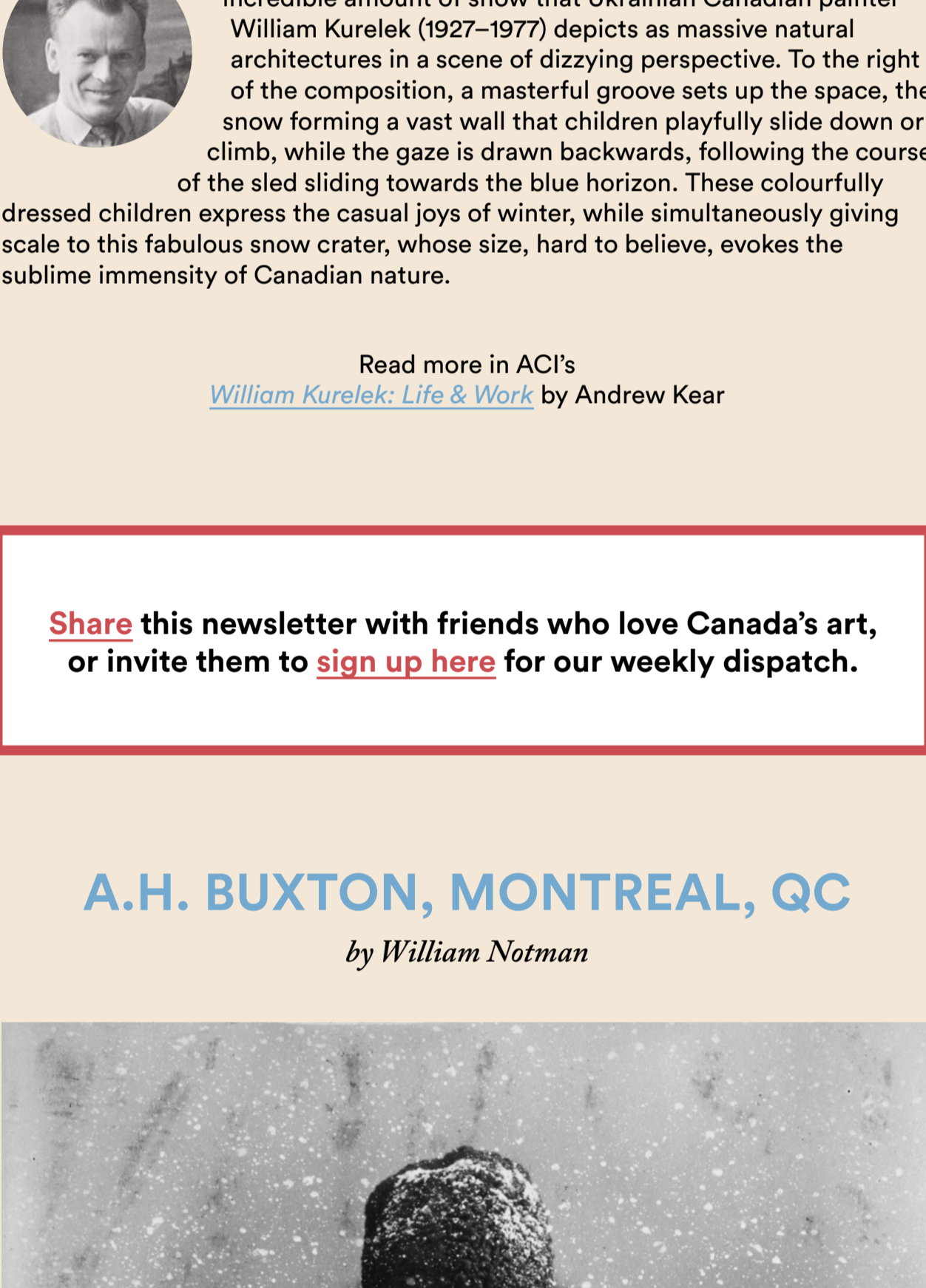


In this drawing, Kinngait (Cape Dorset) artist Kananginak Pootoogook (1935–2010) depicts a dramatic episode in a brother and sister's journey across the Arctic tundra. The Inuktitut text at the bottom of the work explains that the siblings have arrived at a camp where they have decided to settle. While building their igloo, the brother becomes thirsty and asks his sister to fetch water from their new neighbour. Kukilgasia, a shaman with alarmingly sharp nails, invites the woman into her home but attacks her as soon as she turns around to pour herself some water. Pootoogook leaves us in suspense, guessing how the story will end.

[Learn more about Kananginak Pootoogook](#)

## THE ICE CONE, MONTMORENCY FALLS

by *Robert C. Todd*



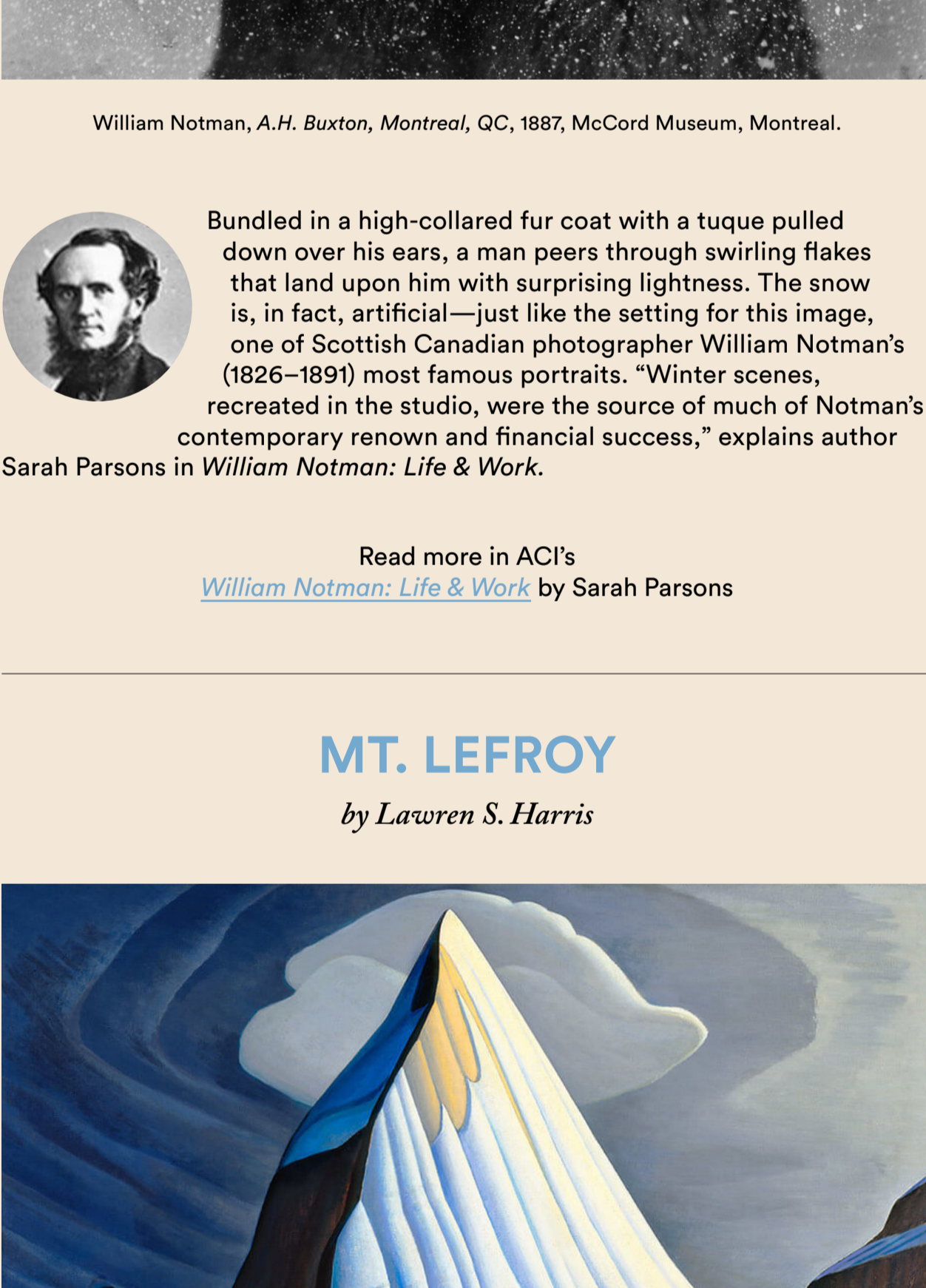
Robert C. Todd, *The Ice Cone, Montmorency Falls*, c.1850, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Wintry traditions of Quebec's towering Montmorency Falls are among Robert C. Todd's (1809–1866) most popular works. In this particular piece, upper-class leisure seekers ride in sleighs while tobogganers slide down the famous ice cone that forms at the base of the waterfall during the colder months. The frozen lake and impressive vista at Montmorency Falls, located just outside Quebec City, have made it a top tourist destination—and a prime subject for artists—since the late eighteenth century.

[Learn more about Robert C. Todd](#)

## THE PHANTOM OF THE SNOW

by *William Blair Bruce*



William Blair Bruce, *The Phantom of the Snow*, 1888, Art Gallery of Hamilton.



One of our country's first Impressionists, Hamilton-born William Blair Bruce (1859–1906) earned praise at the prestigious Paris Salon in 1888 with *The Phantom of the Snow*. This arresting masterpiece depicts a fallen trapper struggling to cross a frozen landscape. Desperate, he reaches toward a nearby ghostly figure, who appears indifferent to the man's plight. European visitors to the Salon were captivated by the distinctly Canadian subject matter of Bruce's painting, which had been inspired by "*The Walker of the Snow*," an 1867 poem by Charles Dawson Shanly, an Irish-born poet who spent his early adulthood in Canada.

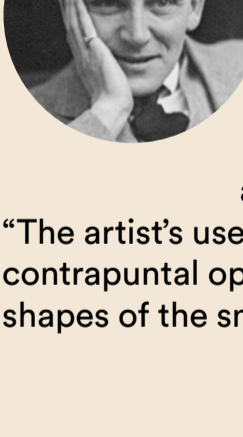
[Learn more about William Blair Bruce](#)

## AFTER THE BLIZZARD IN MANITOBA

by *William Kurelek*



William Kurelek, *After the Blizzard in Manitoba*, 1967, Collection of Donald and Beth Sobey.



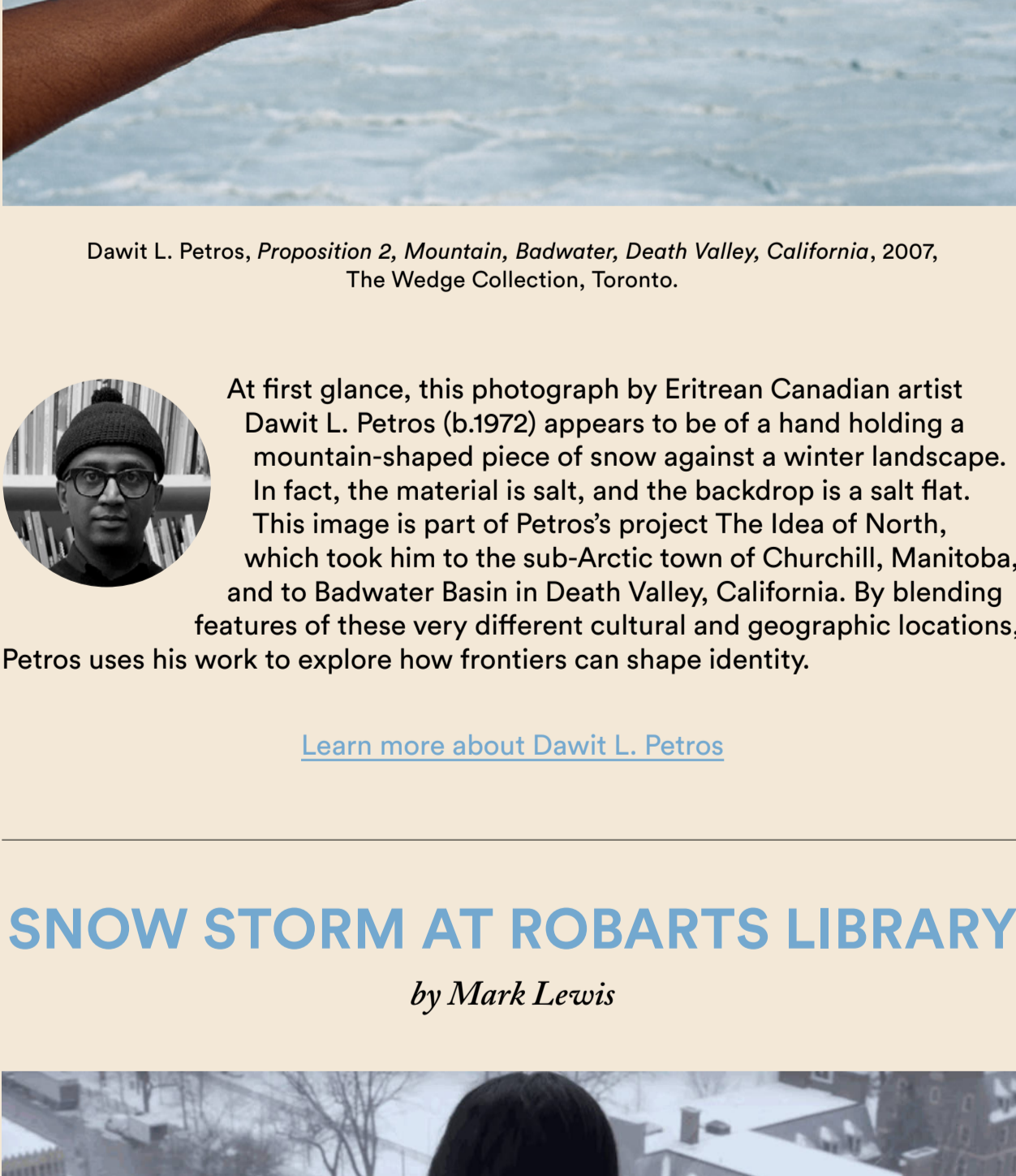
A blizzard has passed over the Prairies, leaving in its wake an incredible amount of snow that Ukrainian Canadian painter William Kurelek (1927–1977) depicts as massive natural architectures in a scene of dizzying perspective. To the right of the composition, a masterful groove sets up the space, the snow forming a vast wall that children playfully slide down or climb, while the gaze is drawn backwards, following the course of the sled sliding towards the blue horizon. These colourfully dressed children express the casual joys of winter, while simultaneously giving scale to this fabulous snow crater, whose size, hard to believe, evokes the sublime immensity of Canadian nature.

Read more in ACI's [William Kurelek: Life & Work](#) by Andrew Kear

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## A.H. BUXTON, MONTREAL, QC

by *William Notman*



William Notman, *A.H. Buxton, Montreal, QC*, 1887, McCord Museum, Montreal.



Bundled in a high-collared fur coat with a tuque pulled down over his ears, a man peers through swirling flakes that land upon him with surprising lightness. The snow is, in fact, artificial—like the setting for this image, one of Scottish Canadian photographer William Notman's (1826–1891) most famous portraits. "Winter scenes, recreated in the studio, were the source of much of Notman's contemporary renown and financial success," explains author Sarah Parsons in *William Notman: Life & Work*.

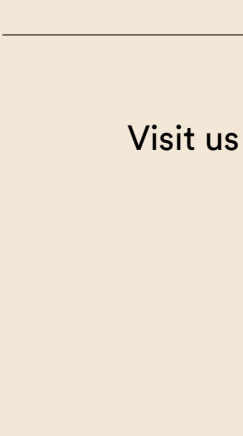
Read more in ACI's [William Notman: Life & Work](#) by Sarah Parsons

## MT. LEFROY

by *Lawren S. Harris*



Lawren S. Harris, *Mt. Lefroy*, 1930, McMichael Canadian Art Collection, Kleinburg.



*Mt. Lefroy*, 1930, an iconic painting by Lawren S. Harris (1885–1970), depicts the snowy peak of the soaring mountain located on the border between Alberta and British Columbia. One side is illuminated, while shadows fall over the other. During the 1920s, the leading Group of Seven member developed an increasingly abstract style of landscape painting that involved simplified forms. When he first visited the Rockies in 1924, Harris "found the kind of sublime landscape he was looking for," explains Ian Dejarin, Executive Director of the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ontario. "This was all tied up with his spiritual approach to art... [and] finding the divine in the landscape."

[Learn more about Lawren S. Harris](#)

## SNOW FUGUE

by *Bertram Brooker*



Bertram Brooker, *Snow Fugue*, 1930, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.



Layers of heavy snow cling to a slender tree in this precisely rendered painting by Toronto-based artist Bertram Brooker (1888–1955). Brooker was impressed by Winnipeg painter [Lionel LeMoine FitzGerald](#) (1890–1956), whose ability to capture the inner essence of a subject influenced his approach here. In *Snow Fugue*, 1930, Brooker reduces the tree and snow to their basic forms, but the composition itself is not as basic as it might seem. As ACI author James King explains, "The artists' use of the musical term 'fugue,' in which two (or more) voices are in contrapuntal opposition to each other, calls the viewer's attention to the complex shapes of the snow as opposed to the relative simplicity of the tree trunk."

Read more in ACI's [Bertram Brooker: Life & Work](#) by James King

## PROPOSITION 2. MOUNTAIN, BADWATER, DEATH VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

by *Dawit L. Petros*



Dawit L. Petros, *Proposition 2, Mountain, Badwater, Death Valley, California*, 2007, The Wedge Collection, Toronto.



At first glance, this photograph by Eritrean Canadian artist Dawit L. Petros (b.1972) appears to be of a hand holding a mountain-shaped piece of snow against a winter landscape. In fact, the material is salt, and the backdrop is a salt flat. This image is part of Petros's project *The Idea of North*, which took him to the sub-Arctic town of Churchill, Manitoba, and to Badwater Basin in Death Valley, California. By blending features of these very different cultural and geographic locations, Petros uses his work to explore how frontiers can shape identity.

[Learn more about Dawit L. Petros](#)

## SNOW STORM AT ROBERTS LIBRARY

by *Mark Lewis*



Mark Lewis, *Snow Storm at Roberts Library* (still), 2015, courtesy of Mark Lewis, Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto, and Marcelle Alix, Paris.



Through the lens of Hamilton-born artist Mark Lewis (b.1958), the quiet and austere interior of the University of Toronto's Roberts Library becomes a refuge from the blizzard that looms outside. The film begins with reverse black-and-white footage of the city's winterscape—cars drive backward and smoke is sucked back into chimneys. The camera then advances toward Roberts Library and seamlessly breaches one of its glass windows. The interior scenes, filmed in colour and moving forward in time, show a woman reading an art history book by the window. The film's tilting angles, slow reverse zooms, and sparring camera movements echo the chaotic motion of the snow furries on the other side of the glass.

[Learn more about Mark Lewis](#)

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