

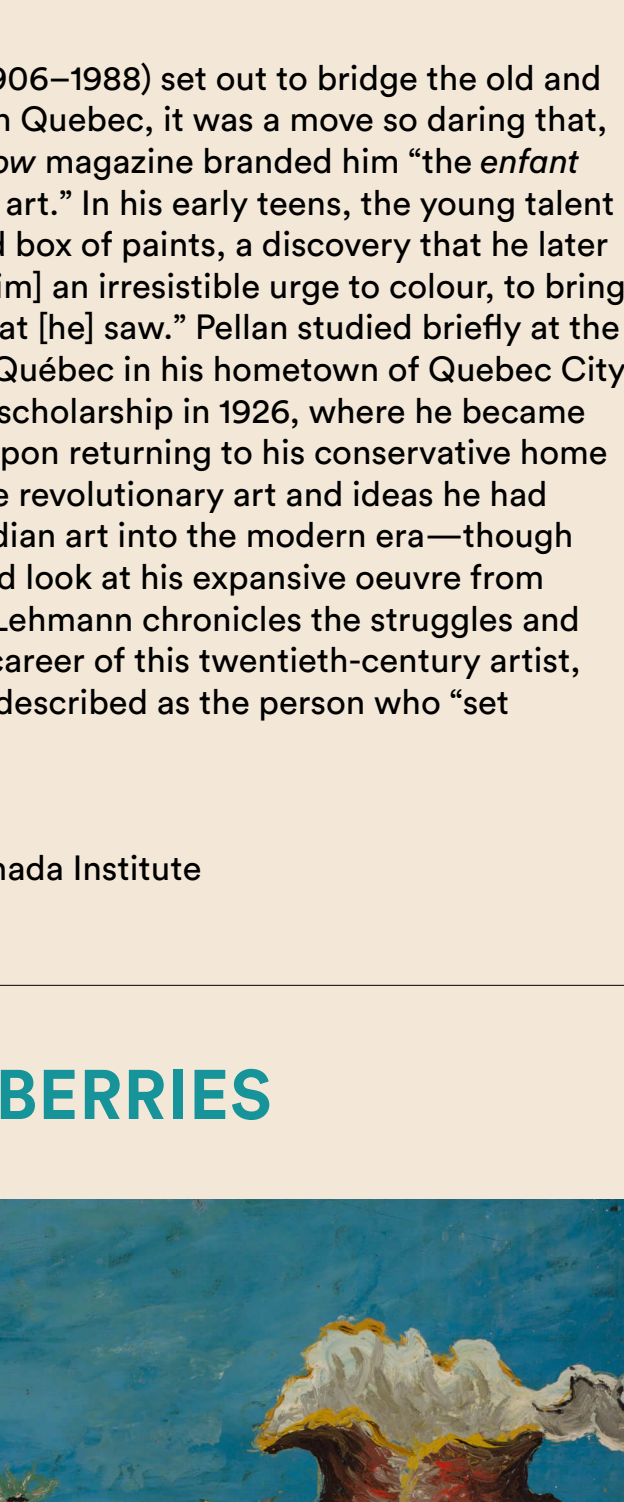
APRIL 14, 2023

THE ENFANT TERRIBLE OF QUEBEC ART
ACI'S NEWEST PUBLICATION ON
MODERN MAVERICK ALFRED PELLAN

*With the publication of **Alfred Pellán: Life & Work** by Maria Rosa Lehmann, ACI celebrates the landmark Quebec artist known for his controversial views, vibrant colours, and belief in the infinite possibilities of creative expression.*



Alfred Pellán in his studio, 1946,
photograph by Ronny Jaques.



Alfred Pellán, *Jeune comédien (Young Actor)*,
c.1935/after 1948, National Gallery
of Canada, Ottawa.

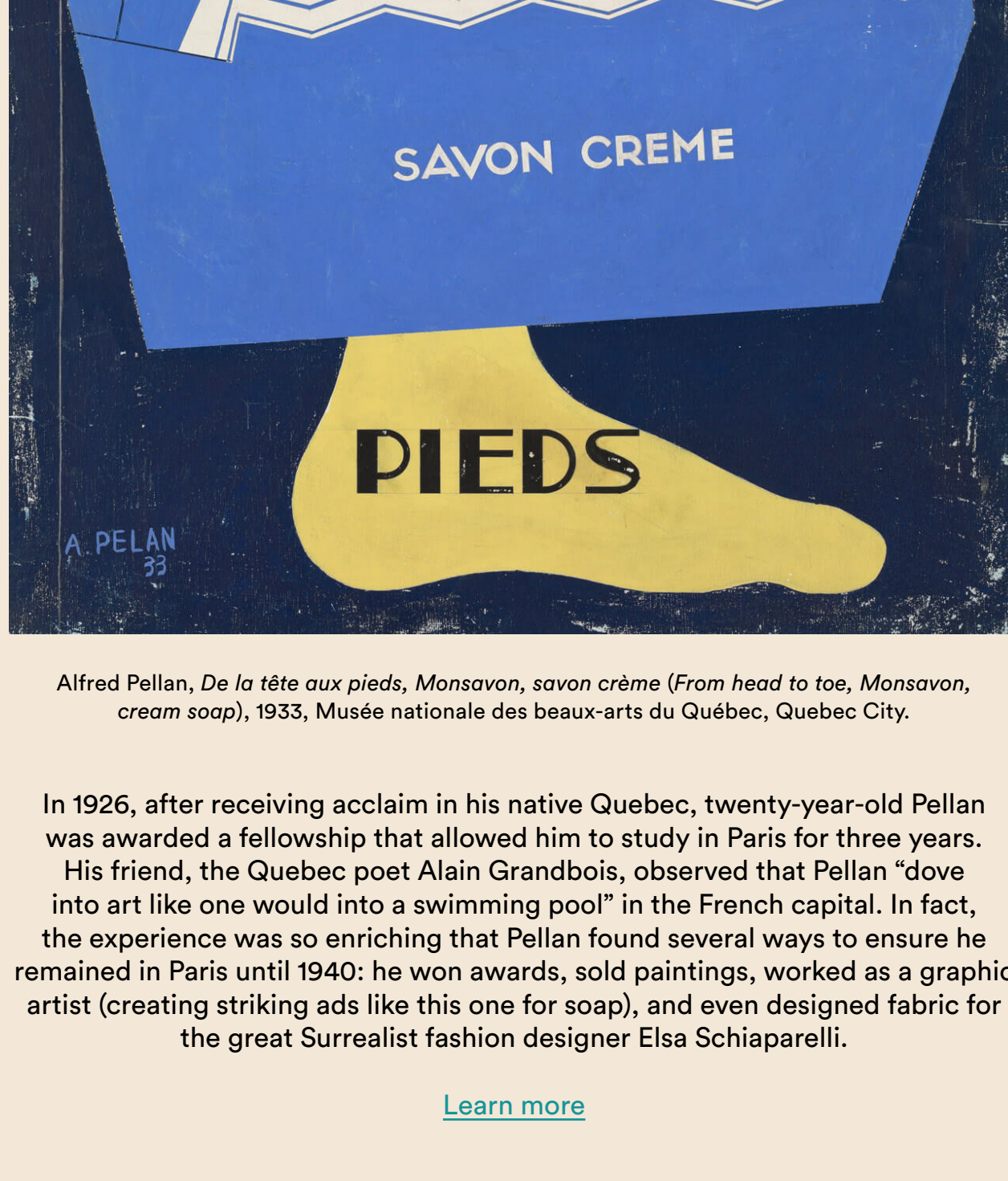


When Alfred Pellán (1906–1988) set out to bridge the old and new currents of art in Quebec, it was a move so daring that, in 1949, *Here and Now* magazine branded him “the enfant terrible of Canadian art.” In his early teens, the young talent found an abandoned box of paints, a discovery that he later said “awakened in [him] an irresistible urge to colour, to bring to life with a brush what [he] saw.” Pellán studied briefly at the École des beaux-arts de Québec in his hometown of Quebec City before moving to Paris with the aid of a scholarship in 1926, where he became captivated by Cubism and Surrealism. Upon returning to his conservative home province in the 1940s, invigorated by the revolutionary art and ideas he had encountered, Pellán helped usher Canadian art into the modern era—though not without controversy. Here’s a curated look at his expansive oeuvre from ACI’s newest title, in which Maria Rosa Lehmann chronicles the struggles and successes that defined the remarkable career of this twentieth-century artist, whom the late art historian Guy Robert described as the person who “set Canadian painting free.”

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

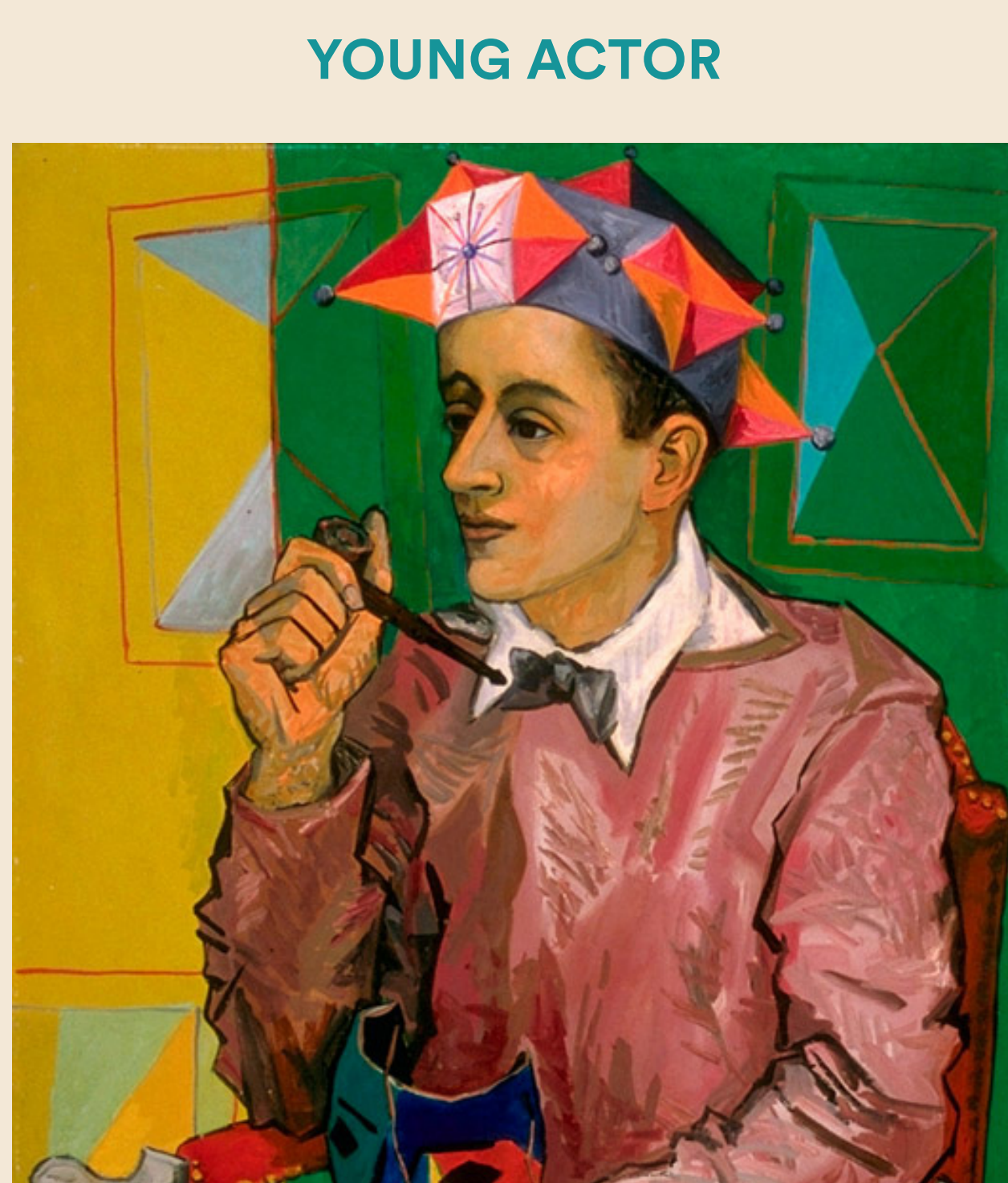
STRAWBERRIES



Alfred Pellán, *Les fraises (Strawberries)*, 1920,
Musée nationale des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City.

When he was just fourteen, Pellán created this accomplished still life of ripe summer strawberries spilling out of a basket and bowl. Despite his lack of formal training, this picture illustrates the artist’s clear command of composition, confident brushwork, and harmonious use of colours. As author Maria Rosa Lehmann points out, “even in one of his very first paintings, Pellán was already demonstrating his artistic audacity.”

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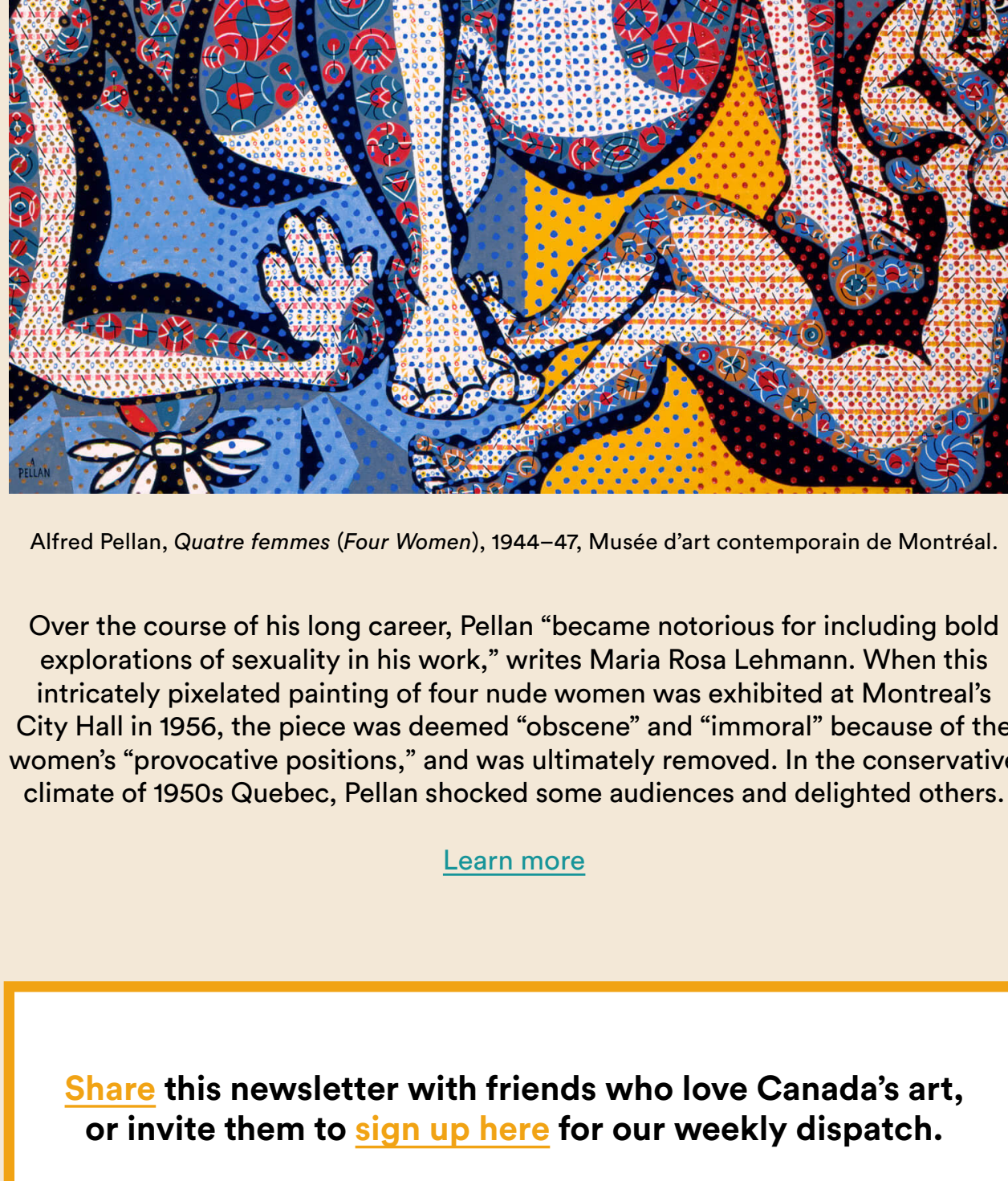
FROM HEAD TO TOE,
MONSAVON, CREAM SOAP

Alfred Pellán, *De la tête aux pieds, Monsavon, savon crème (From head to toe, Monsavon, cream soap)*, 1933,
Musée nationale des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City.

In 1926, after receiving acclaim in his native Quebec, twenty-year-old Pellán was awarded a fellowship that allowed him to study in Paris for three years. His friend, the Quebec poet Alain Grandbois, observed that Pellán “dove into art like one would into a swimming pool” in the French capital. In fact, the experience was so enriching that Pellán found several ways to ensure he remained in Paris until 1940: he won awards, sold paintings, worked as a graphic artist (creating striking ads like this one for soap), and even designed fabric for the great Surrealist fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli.

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INSTRUMENTS DE MUSIQUE – A

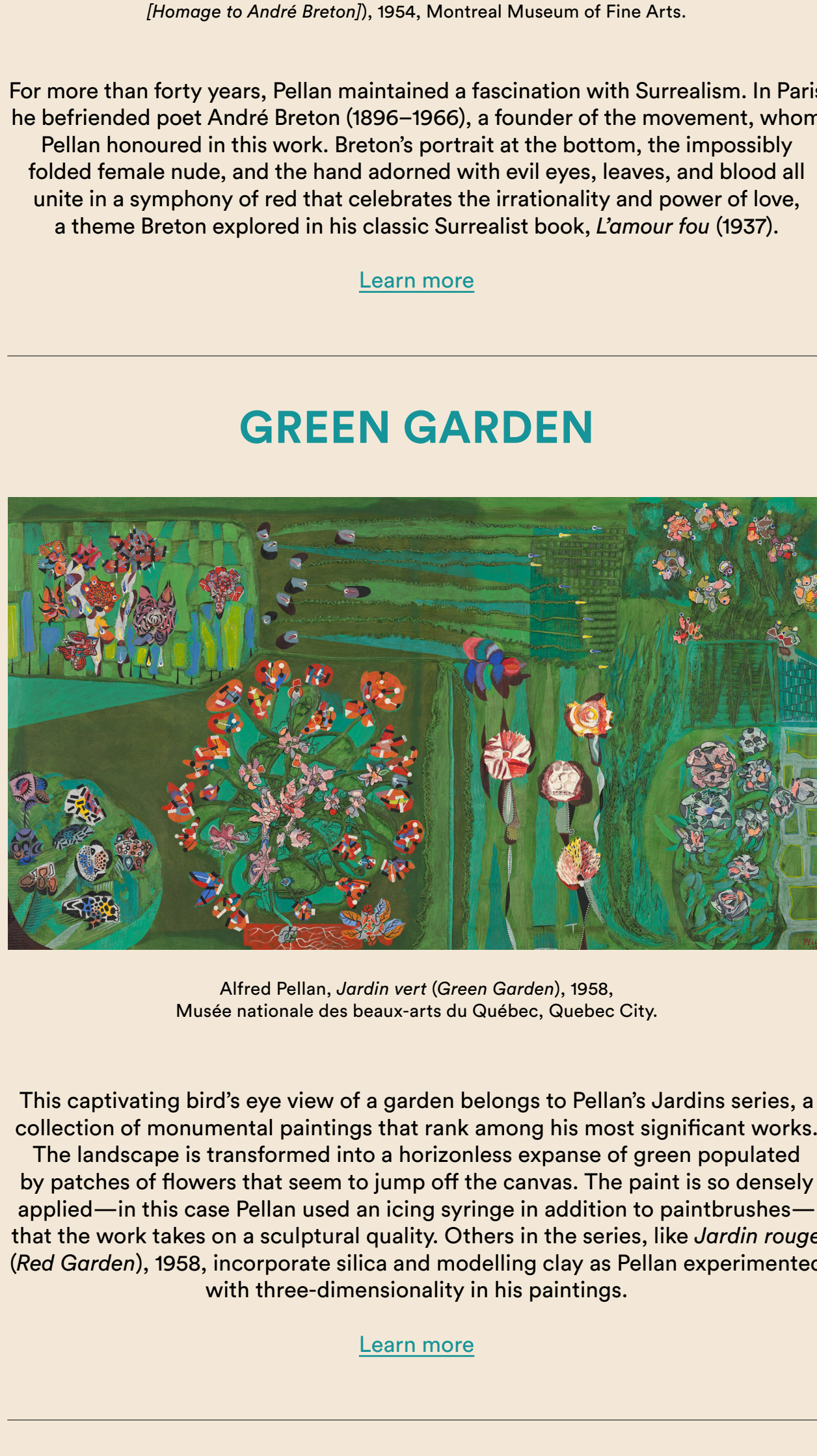


Alfred Pellán, *Instruments de musique – A (Musical Instruments – A)*, 1933,
Davis Museum at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts.

This Cubist-inspired still life features an arrangement of obscured, fragmented, and disconnected objects. The apples and the open book are easily identifiable, but the instruments on the painting’s left side are fractured, dissolving into lines and coloured masses. In Paris, Pellán’s style evolved under the influence of avant-garde artists like Pablo Picasso. *Musical Instruments – A*, which bridges representation and abstraction, marked an important critical success, earning him first prize in a 1935 competition at the *Salon d’art mural de Paris*.

[Learn more](#)

YOUNG ACTOR



Alfred Pellán, *Jeune comédien (Young Actor)*, c.1935/after 1948, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Pellán had an affinity for the theatre and was involved in several productions in the 1940s as a set and costume designer. He also painted people he met during that time, including the young actor featured in this colourful portrait full of playful contradictions. The male sitter holds a pipe and has a wistful smile, suggesting a certain level of seriousness, but he also sports a delightful jester’s cap and cradles a mask in his lap, both tools of his trade.

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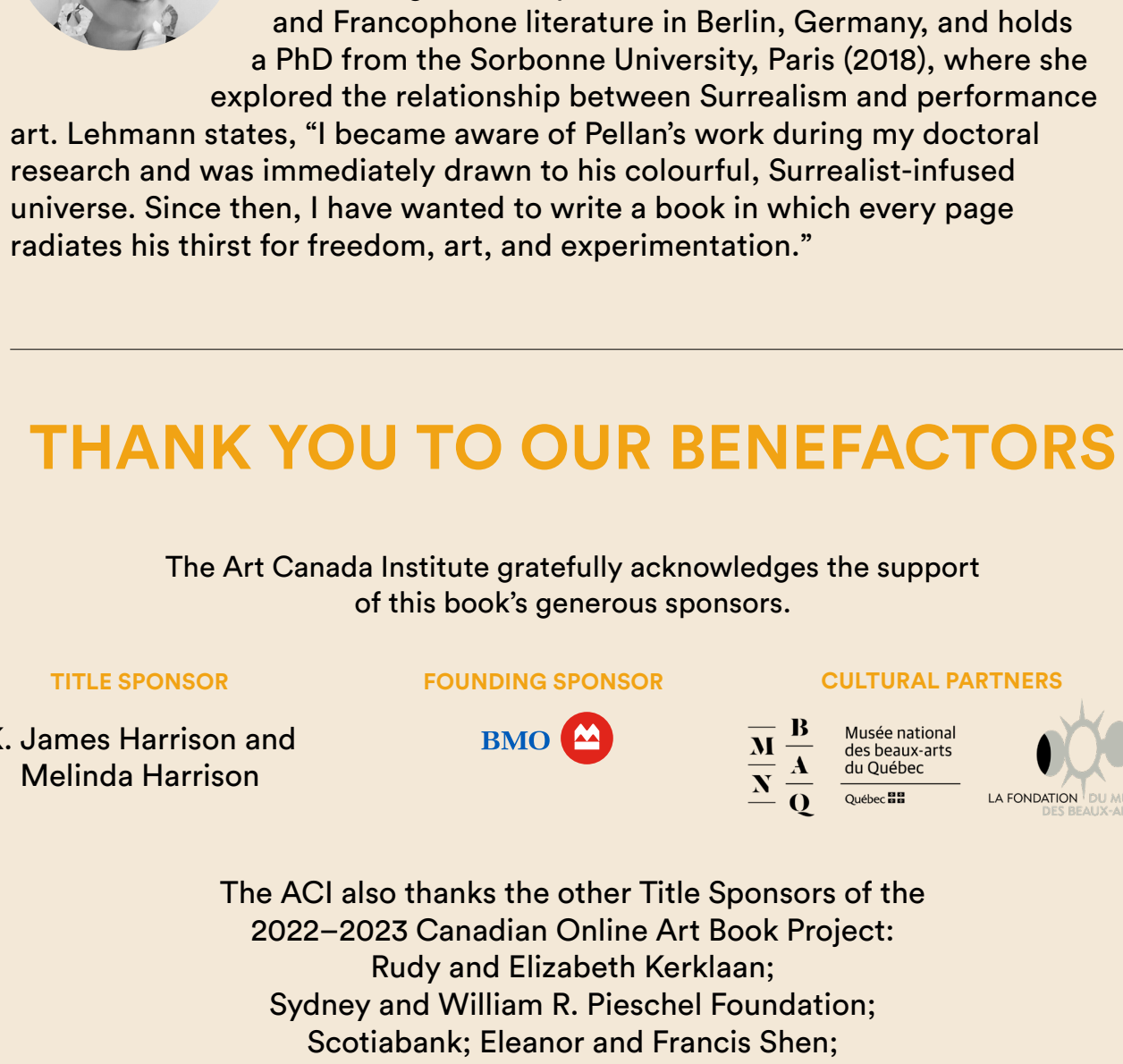
FOUR WOMEN



Alfred Pellán, *Quatre femmes (Four Women)*, 1944–47, Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal.

Over the course of his long career, Pellán “became notorious for including bold explorations of sexuality in his work,” writes Maria Rosa Lehmann. When this intricately pixelated painting of four nude women was exhibited at Montreal’s City Hall in 1956, the piece was deemed “obscene” and “immoral” because of the women’s “provocative positions,” and was ultimately removed. In the conservative climate of 1950s Quebec, Pellán shocked some audiences and delighted others.

[Learn more](#)

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or invite them to [sign up here](#) for our weekly dispatch.MAD LOVE
(HOMAGE TO ANDRÉ BRETON)

Alfred Pellán, *L’amour fou (Homage to André Breton) (Mad Love (Homage to André Breton))*, 1954, Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal.

For more than forty years, Pellán maintained a fascination with Surrealism. In Paris he befriended poet André Breton (1896–1966), a founder of the movement, whom Pellán honoured in this work. Breton’s portrait at the bottom, the impossibly folded female nude, and the hand adorned with evil eyes, leaves, and blood all unite in a symphony of red that celebrates the irrationality and power of love, a theme Breton explored in his classic Surrealist book, *L’amour fou* (1937).

[Learn more](#)

GREEN GARDEN



Alfred Pellán, *Jardin vert (Green Garden)*, 1958,
Musée nationale des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City.

This captivating bird’s eye view of a garden belongs to Pellán’s Jardins series, a collection of monumental paintings that rank among his most significant works. The landscape is transformed into a horizonless expanse of green populated by patches of flowers that seem to jump off the canvas. The paint is so densely applied—in this case Pellán used an icing syringe in addition to paintbrushes—that the work takes on a sculptural quality. Others in the series, like *Jardin rouge* (Red Garden), 1958, incorporate silica and modelling clay as Pellán experimented with three-dimensionality in his paintings.

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MINI-BESTIARY NO. 31

Alfred Pellán, *Mini-bestaire n° 31 (Mini-Bestary no. 31)*, c.1971,
Musée nationale des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City.

Pellán’s canvases and works on paper were populated by a multitude of surreal creatures, but in his Mini-bestaire (Mini-Bestary) series, the whimsical menagerie took on solid form. Here a round, smooth rock is brought to life with big eyes, bright colours, a pointy nose and tail, and thin green legs. In 1974, Pellán spent time in Quebec’s Gaspé Peninsula with his friend André Breton. The artist and poet discussed art as they roamed beaches and collected rocks, shells, and other objects. Thirty years later, Pellán transformed the small stones he’d gathered to create these charming little critters.

[Learn more](#)

MUTONS...

Alfred Pellán, *Mutons...*, 1974, Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal.

Later in his career, Pellán embraced screen printing, which he valued for its potential to make his art more accessible through the production of multiple editions. His dazzling serigraphs, like *Mutons...*, 1974, are almost psychedelic in their visual impact. Pellán created inventive compositions of figures, animals, and objects that are both united through lines and separated by blocks of colours, as we see in this image.

[Learn more](#)

PIQUE-MÉGOTS

Alfred Pellán, *Pique-mégots*, 1974, Musée nationale des beaux-arts du Québec, Quebec City.

A Surrealist object *par excellence*, *Pique-mégots* is from a series of shoe sculptures that Pellán began in 1974, which draw on bawdy humour and uncanny juxtapositions. The French title translates into English as “butt picker,” and the work consists of a life-sized black leather shoe with an impractical metal hook that has impaled a cigarette. Others in the series, like *Lexhibitioniste* (The Exhibitionist), and *Pour masochiste* (For Masochist), also 1974, have even more explicit erotic references. These fetishistic sculptures expose sexual desires and fantasies and speak to Pellán’s power as an eternal provocateur.

[Learn more](#)

About the Author of **Alfred Pellán: Life & Work**

Maria Rosa Lehmann is a scholar and teacher who specializes in transnational phenomena and local strategies of avant-garde and performance art. She teaches studio art and Francophone literature in Berlin, Germany, and holds a PhD from the Sorbonne University, Paris (2018), where she explored the relationship between Surrealism and performance art. Lehmann states, “I became aware of Pellán’s work during my doctoral research and was immediately drawn to his colourful, Surrealist-infused universe. Since then, I have wanted to write a book in which every page radiates his thirst for freedom, art, and experimentation.”

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