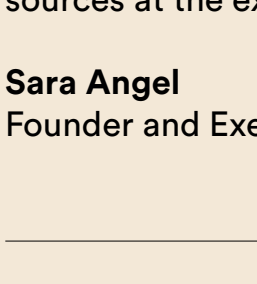


SEPTEMBER 8, 2023

# THE CLOSE-UP: ROBERT HOULE & HIS ICONIC WORK *KANATA*

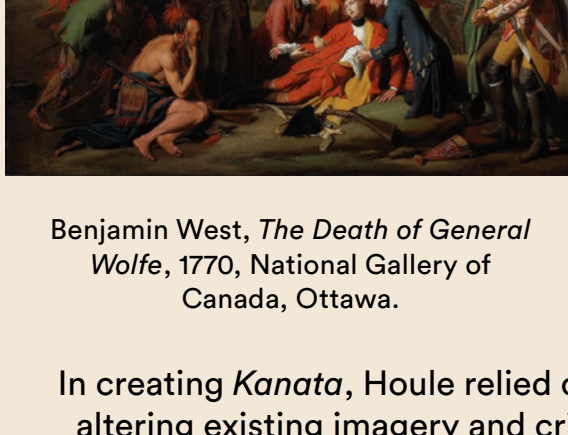
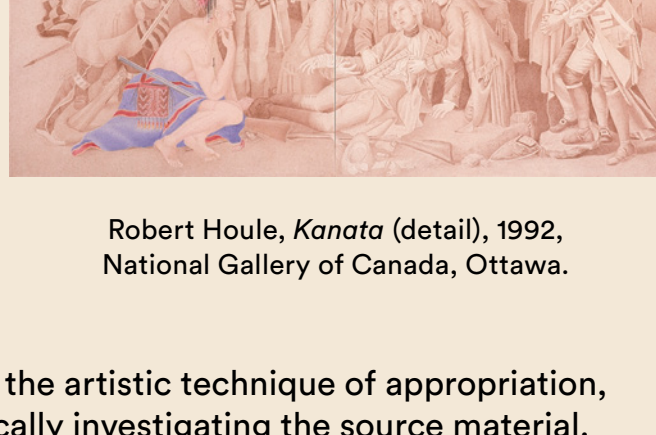
*September 13 is the anniversary of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, fought 264 years ago between France and Britain. In his iconic 1992 work, Kanata, Saulteaux artist Robert Houle revisits not only this pivotal moment in Canadian history, but also one of North America's most famed paintings—from a First Nations perspective.*

Robert Houle, *Kanata*, 1992, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

On this week in 1759, French and British forces clashed on the Plains of Abraham just outside Quebec City, a decisive battle in the Seven Years' War. A victory for the British, the famous confrontation eventually led to the toppling of New France, and would become part of the mythology surrounding Canada's founding. It is also the subject of *Kanata*, 1992, by Saulteaux artist Robert Houle (b.1947), who builds upon a canonical painting of the battle by British American artist Benjamin West (1738–1820). Drawing on the Art Canada Institute publication *Robert Houle: Life & Work* by Shirley Madill, this newsletter delves into Houle's revered work and how it calls into question the nature of history-telling in Canada, which for so long has been dominated by French and English sources at the expense of Indigenous voices.

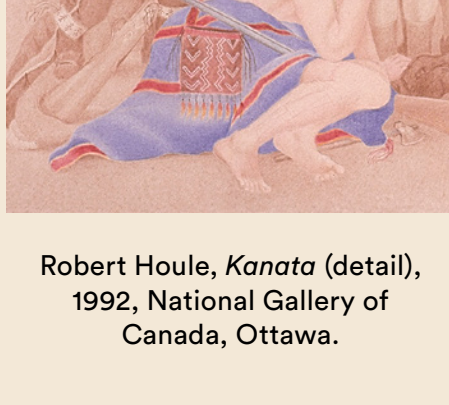
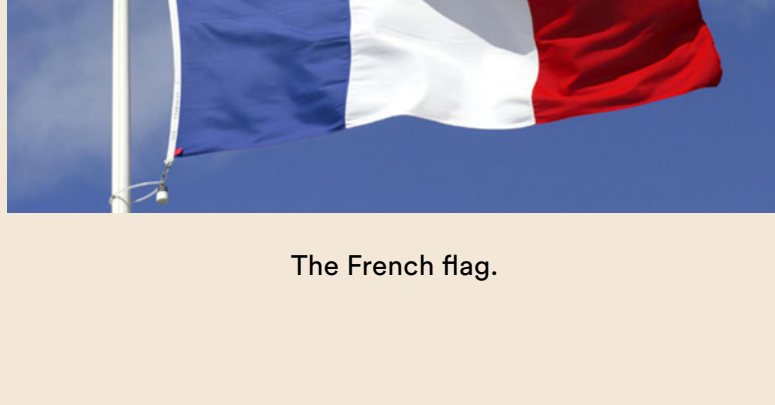
Sara Angel  
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## THE ART OF APPROPRIATION

Benjamin West, *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.Robert Houle, *Kanata* (detail), 1992, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

In creating *Kanata*, Houle relied on the artistic technique of appropriation, altering existing imagery and critically investigating the source material. The central panel in *Kanata* (above right) is a copy, done in sepia-toned Conté crayon, of Benjamin West's *The Death of General Wolfe*, 1770 (above left). In West's imagined history of the battle—a dramatic rendition of the final minutes of Wolfe's life—the British leader is attended to by an entourage that includes a kneeling, contemplative Delaware warrior. In artworks from this era, Indigenous people are presented as symbolic, passive witnesses to Euro-Canadian actors, a practice Houle questions through *Kanata*.

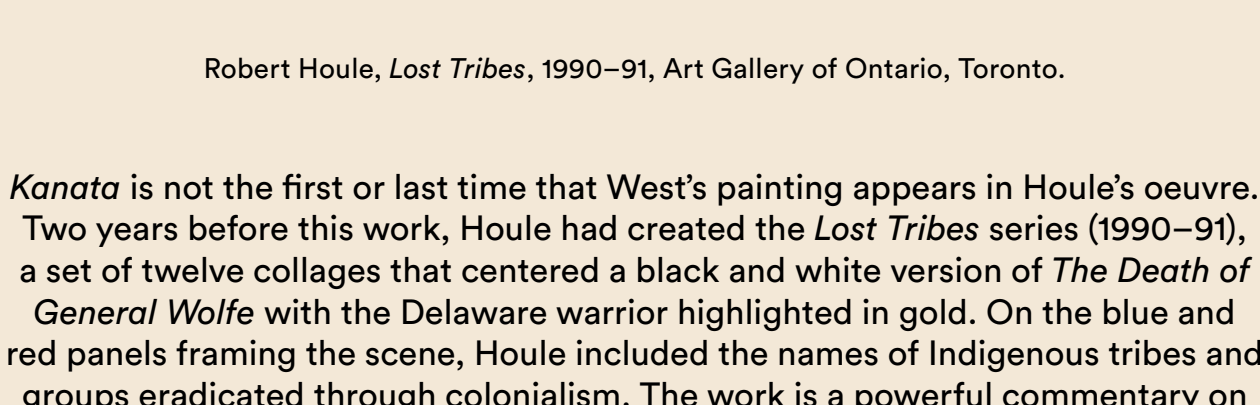
## A NEW CENTRAL CHARACTER

Robert Houle, *Kanata* (detail), 1992, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

The French flag.

In Houle's version of West's work, the drama of the original painting is neutralized through the use of beige tones. The only source of colour comes from the red and blue clothing worn by the Indigenous warrior (above left), who becomes the focus of the piece. The scene is placed between blue and red panels that mimic the French flag (above right) and reference the national colours of the duelling colonial powers. "The Indian is in parentheses ... surrounded by this gigantic red and this gigantic blue and is sandwiched in that environment," says Houle. "...And that is reality because the English and the French are still the major players in the making of this history, history as it was."

## FORERUNNER TO *KANATA*

Robert Houle, *Lost Tribes*, 1990–91, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

*Kanata* is not the first or last time that West's painting appears in Houle's oeuvre. Two years before this work, Houle had created the *Lost Tribes* series (1990–91), a set of twelve collages that centered a black and white version of *The Death of General Wolfe* with the Delaware warrior highlighted in gold. On the blue and red panels framing the scene, Houle included the names of Indigenous tribes and groups eradicated through colonialism. The work is a powerful commentary on the reverberating effects of Canada's genocidal policies and practices, as well as the erasure of Indigenous people within Canadian history.

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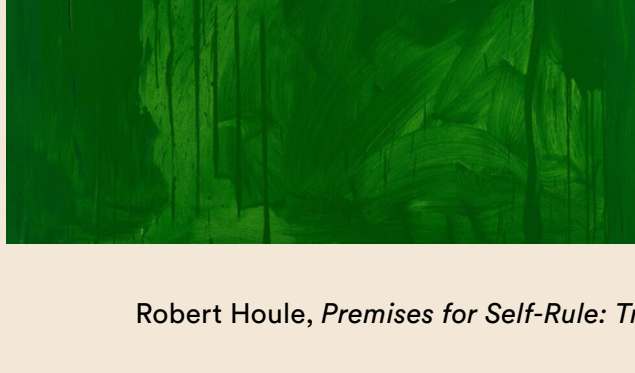
## INDIGENOUS SOVEREIGNTY



Elijah Harper votes against the Meech Lake Accord in 1990 in the Manitoba Legislature, photograph by Wayne Glowacki / Winnipeg Free Press.

*Kanata* was created at a moment when the matter of Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination was receiving significant attention. Two years before Houle painted his famed work, Elijah Harper, then the chief of Manitoba's Red Sucker Lake First Nation, gained national prominence for his dissenting vote on the Meech Lake Accord, a constitutional amendment that would codify Quebec's status as a distinct society within Canada. **Harper stated**, "We were the First Peoples here ... we were the ones that made treaties with the settlers that came from Europe. These settler people and their governments didn't recognize us as a Nation, as a government and that is why we opposed the Meech Lake Accord."

## HOULE AND HISTORY



**Treaty No. 1.** ARTICLES OF A TREATY made and concluded this third day of August in the year of Our Lord one thousand eight hundred and seventy-one, between Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen of Great Britain and Ireland by Her Commissioner, Wemyss M. Simpson, Esquire, of the one part, and the Chippewa and Swamians, inhabitants of the hereinafter defined and chosen and named as other part...Whereas all the country...have been notified and it is the desire of Her Majesty to open up to settlement and immigration a tract of country bounded and described as hereinafter mentioned, and to obtain the consent thereto of her Indian subjects inhabiting the said tract, and to make a treaty and arrangements with them so that there may be peace and good will between them and Her Majesty...The Chippewa and Swampy Cree Tribes of Indians and all other the Indians inhabiting the district hereinafter described and defined do hereby code, release, surrender and yield up to Her Majesty the Queen and Successors forever all the lands included within the following limits, that is to say—Beginning at the internatio

Robert Houle, *Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1*, 1994, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

*Kanata* is in line with Houle's larger practice, which often relies on archival images and documents to draw attention to historical injustices and false colonial narratives. Following his creation of *Kanata*, Houle painted *Premises for Self-Rule: Treaty No. 1*, 1994, a work that is part of a series in which the artist paired gestural, monochromatic paintings with legal documents and treaties that were brokered between Canada and First Nations (only to later be rejected). On top of the text (above right), Houle has placed an archival photograph of Indigenous men in traditional regalia, emphasizing their long-held role as stewards and protectors of the land.

## O-WEEN DU MUH WAUN (WE WERE TOLD)

Robert Houle, *O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told)*, 2017, Confederation Centre Art Gallery, Charlottetown.

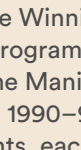
In 2017, as Canada celebrated its 150th anniversary, Houle revisited *The Death of General Wolfe* once more in *O-ween du muh waun (We Were Told)*, a mural commissioned by the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown, PEI. The monumental oil painting focuses solely on the Delaware warrior from *The Death of General Wolfe*, who now sits alone at the Plains of Abraham, contemplating the waters rather than the dying British general. The chaotic battle scene that formerly surrounded him has been replaced by a serene landscape with no signs of colonial intervention or influence. Commenting on the work, Houle notes that "the 150 was not an issue for me, but rather a correction to clarify that my sense of country dates back further than 1867."

## THANK YOU TO OUR BENEFACTORS

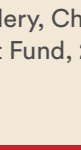
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