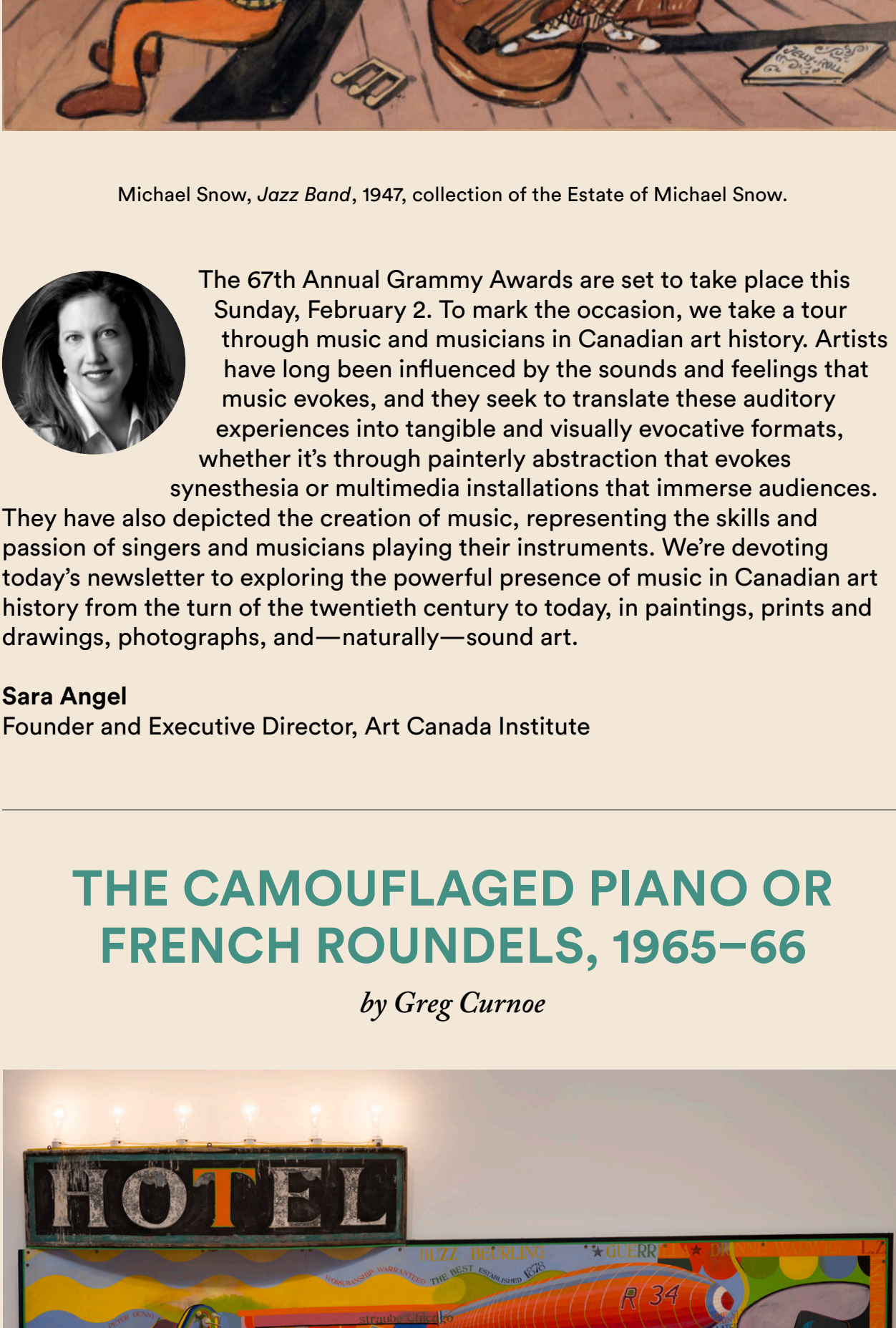


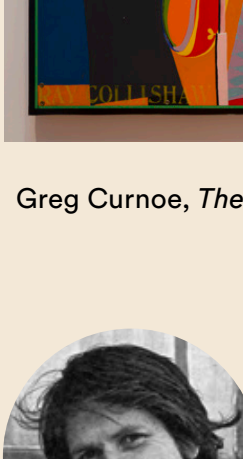
JANUARY 31, 2025

IN PERFECT HARMONY MUSIC IN CANADIAN ART

On the harmonious relationship between art and music.



Michael Snow, *Jazz Band*, 1947, collection of the Estate of Michael Snow.



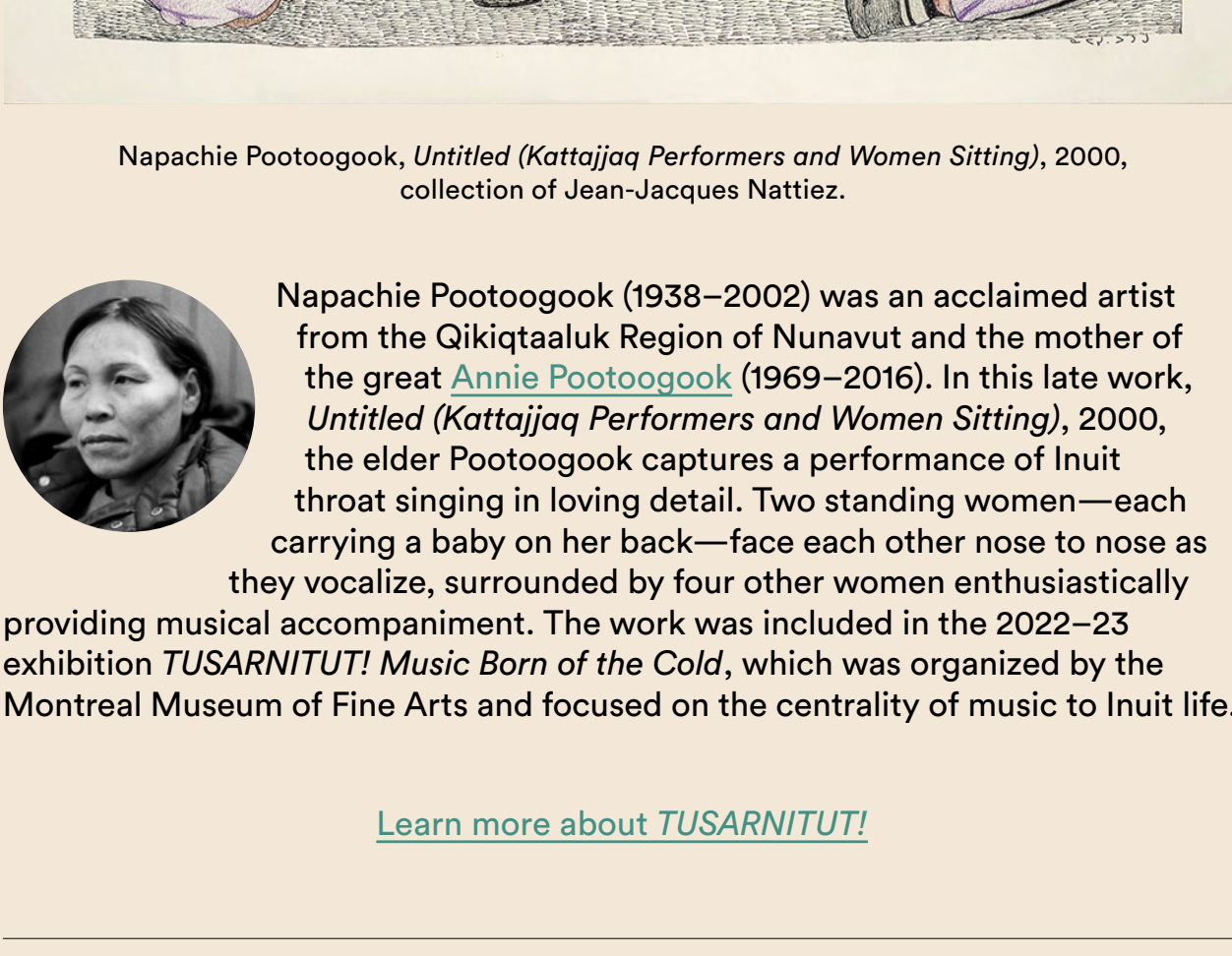
The 67th Annual Grammy Awards are set to take place this Sunday, February 2. To mark the occasion, we take a tour through music and musicians in Canadian art history. Artists have long been influenced by the sounds and feelings that music evokes, and they seek to translate these auditory experiences into tangible and visually evocative formats, whether it's through painterly abstraction that evokes synesthesia or multimedia installations that immerse audiences. They have also depicted the creation of music, representing the skills and passion of singers and musicians playing their instruments. We're devoting today's newsletter to exploring the powerful presence of music in Canadian art history from the turn of the twentieth century to today, in paintings, prints and drawings, photographs, and—naturally—sound art.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

THE CAMOUFLAGED PIANO OR FRENCH ROUNDELS, 1965–66

by Greg Curnoe



Greg Curnoe, *The Camouflaged Piano or French Rounfels*, 1965–66, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. © Estate of Greg Curnoe / CARCC Ottawa 2025.



This monumental mixed-media painting was created by London, Ontario, artist Greg Curnoe (1936–1992) in the mid-1960s. The undulating waves of bright colour allow you to almost hear the baritone saxophone and the upright piano dominating a composition that also references technologies of warfare. Curnoe described this ambitious, light-bulb-illuminated work as representing “things and events that interest me—without any logical order.” Judith Rodger, author of the Art Canada Institute book *Greg Curnoe: Life & Work*, claims the painting was “typical of his humour.” Its creation was documented by fellow London artist *Jack Chambers* (1931–1978) in his 1967 experimental film *R34* (named for the famed British airship depicted here).

Read more in ACI's
[Greg Curnoe: Life & Work](#) by Judith Rodger

UNTITLED (KATTAJJAQ PERFORMERS AND WOMEN SITTING), 2000

by Napachie Pootoogook



Napachie Pootoogook, *Untitled (Kattajjaq Performers and Women Sitting)*, 2000, collection of Jean-Jacques Nattiez.

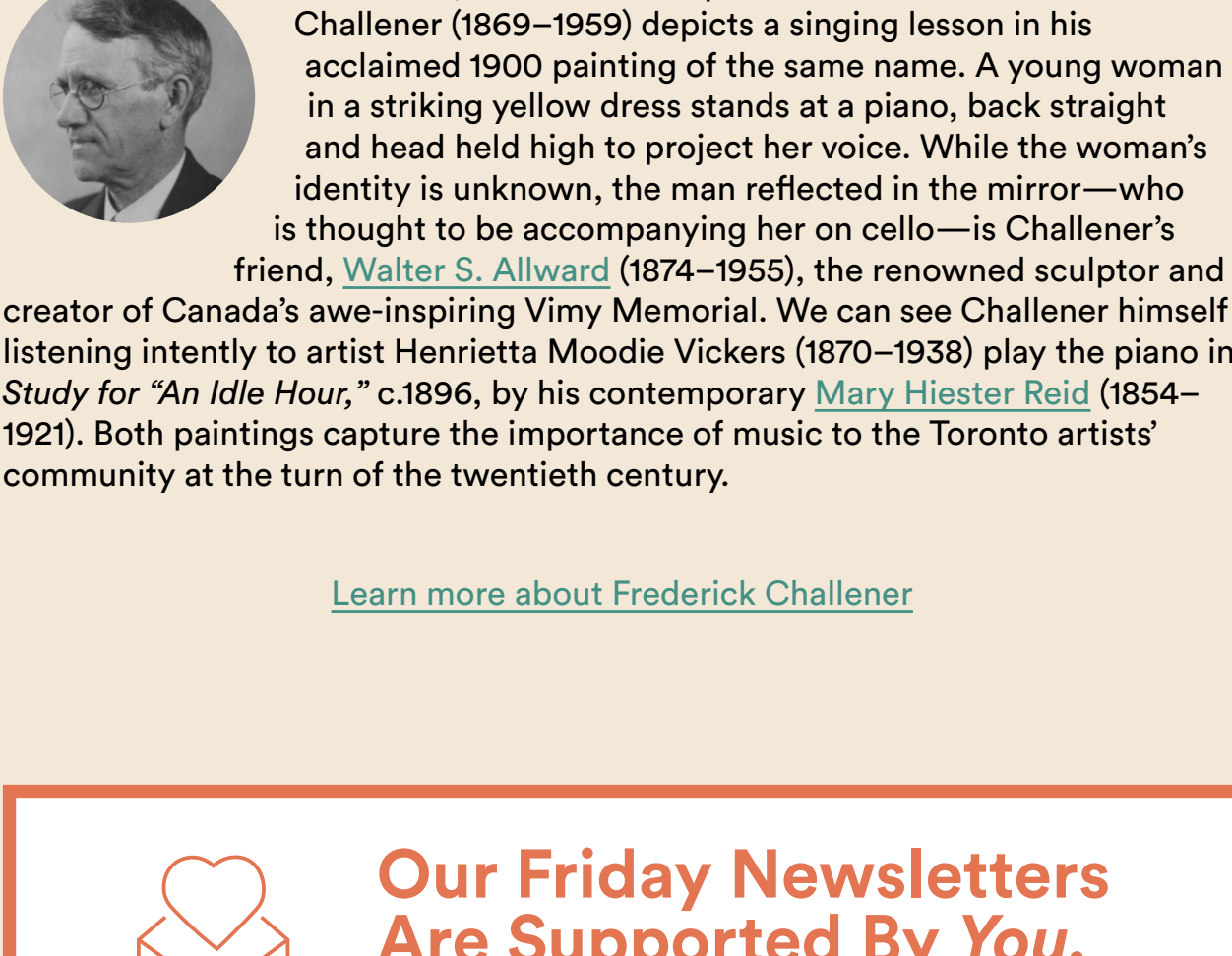


Napachie Pootoogook (1938–2002) was an acclaimed artist from the Qikiqtaaluk Region of Nunavut and the mother of the great *Amie Pootoogook* (1962–2016). In this late work, *Untitled (Kattajjaq Performers and Women Sitting)*, 2000, the elder Pootoogook captures a performance of Inuit throat singing in loving detail. Two standing women—each carrying a baby on her back—face each other nose to nose as they vocalize, surrounded by four other women enthusiastically providing musical accompaniment. The work was included in the 2022–23 exhibition *TUSARNUTUT! Music Born of the Cold*, which was organized by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts and focused on the centrality of music to Inuit life.

[Learn more about TUSARNUTUT!](#)

O CANADA, 1970

by Joyce Wieland



Joyce Wieland, *O Canada*, 1970, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

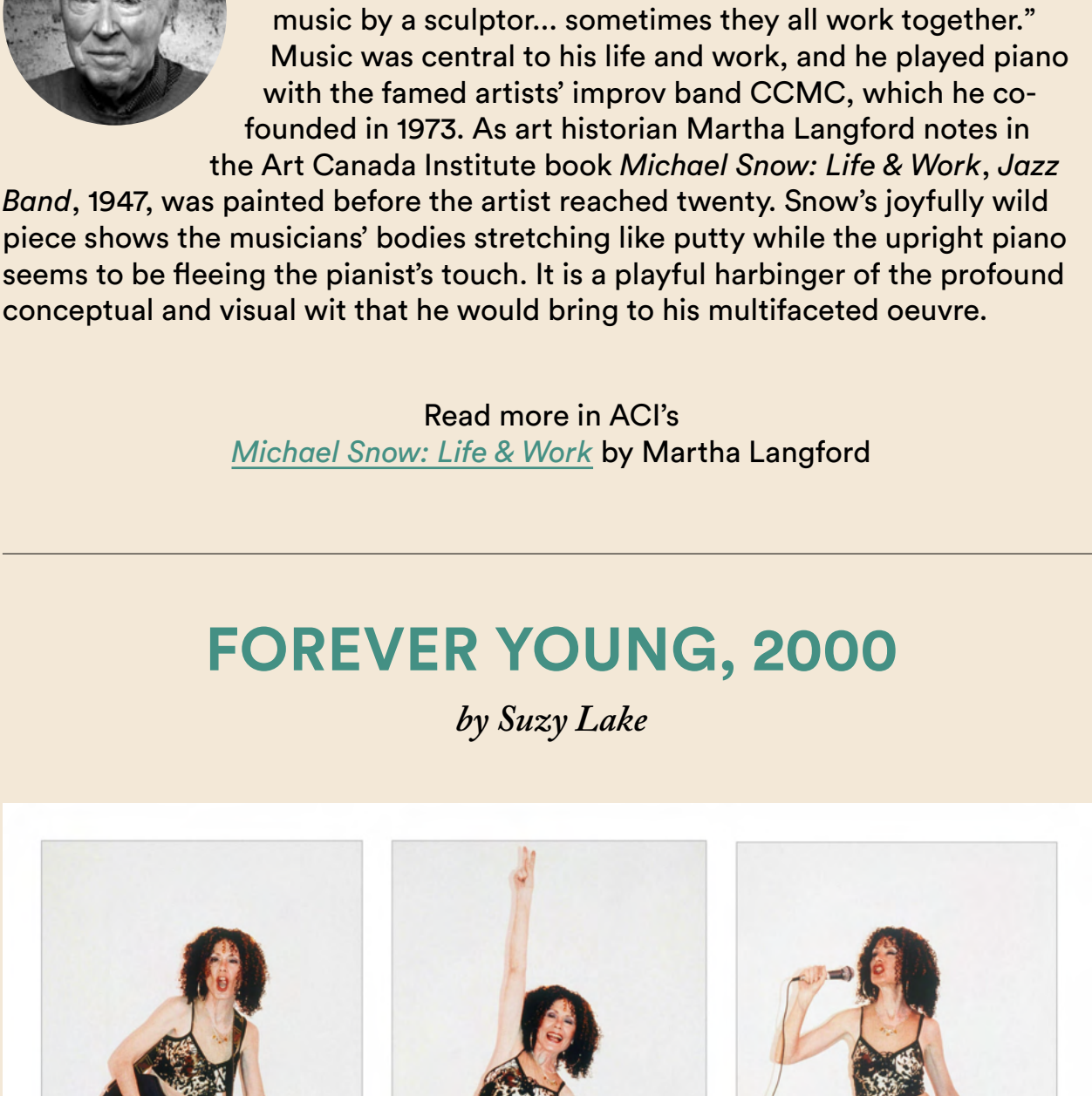


This iconic work by beloved Toronto-born artist Joyce Wieland (1930–1998) is the document of a performance that fused the personal and the political through song. To create it, Wieland recited the Canadian national anthem, pressing her lips against a lithograph stone as she sounded out each syllable. The sensuous red lipstick nods to the colour of our flag while embodying national identity in a woman's voice and self-fashioning. Art historian Johanne Sloan, author of the Art Canada Institute book *Joyce Wieland: Life & Work*, explains, “Using the title as an important clue, viewers will likely feel their mouths twitch in recognition. In effect, this is a kind of interactive art.”

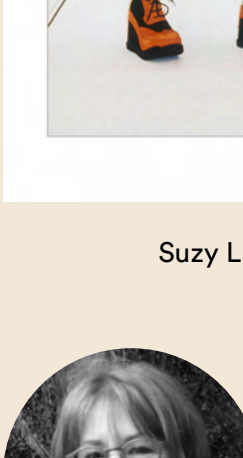
Read more in ACI's
[Joyce Wieland: Life & Work](#) by Johanne Sloan

SOUNDS ASSEMBLING, 1928

by Bertram Brooker



Bertram Brooker, *Sounds Assembling*, 1928, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

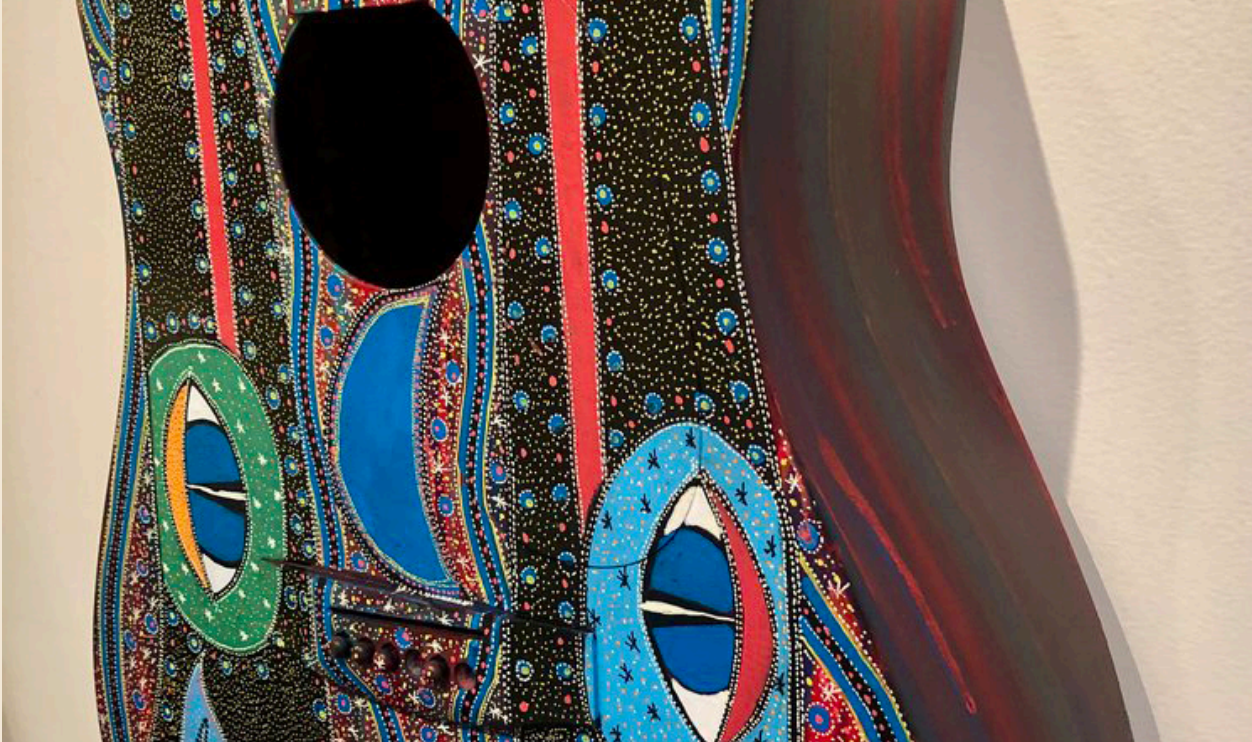


British-born, Manitoba-raised artist and polymath Bertram Brooker (1888–1955) is considered to be one of the first abstract artists in Canada. His dazzling *Sounds Assembling*, 1928, captures the close bond between music and painterly abstraction. The composition relays a percussive auditory experience, conveying a strong sense of dissonance, movement, and energy through the juxtaposition of jagged multicoloured lines, soothing circles, and forceful blasts of conical forms. Scholar James King, author of the Art Canada Institute book *Bertram Brooker: Life & Work*, explains that “*Sounds Assembling* is often considered Brooker's most accomplished work because of the majestic and intricate way it takes the viewer into a mysterious realm.”

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

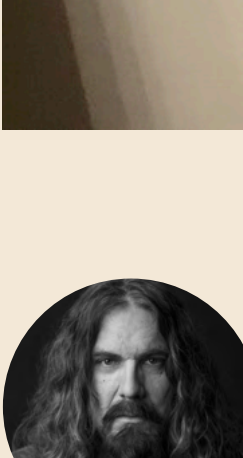
A SINGING LESSON, 1900

by Frederick Challenger



Frederick Challenger, *A Singing Lesson*, 1900, private collection.

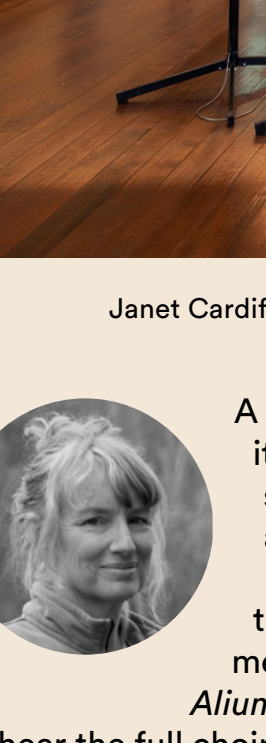
Mary Hiester Reid, *Study for "An Idle Hour,"* c.1896, Museum London.



British-born, Toronto-based painter and muralist Frederick Challenger (1869–1959) depicts a singing lesson in his acclaimed 1900 painting of the same name. A young woman in a striking yellow dress stands at a piano, back straight and head held high to project her voice. While the woman's identity is unknown, the man reflected in the mirror—who is thought to be accompanying her on cello—is Challenger's friend, *Walter S. Allward* (1874–1955), the renowned sculptor and creator of Canada's awe-inspiring *Vimy Memorial*. We can see Challenger himself listening intently to artist Henrietta Moodie Vickers (1870–1938) play the piano in *Study for "An Idle Hour,"* c.1896, by his contemporary *Mary Hiester Reid* (1854–1921). Both paintings capture the importance of music to the Toronto artists' community at the turn of the twentieth century.

[Learn more about Frederick Challenger](#)

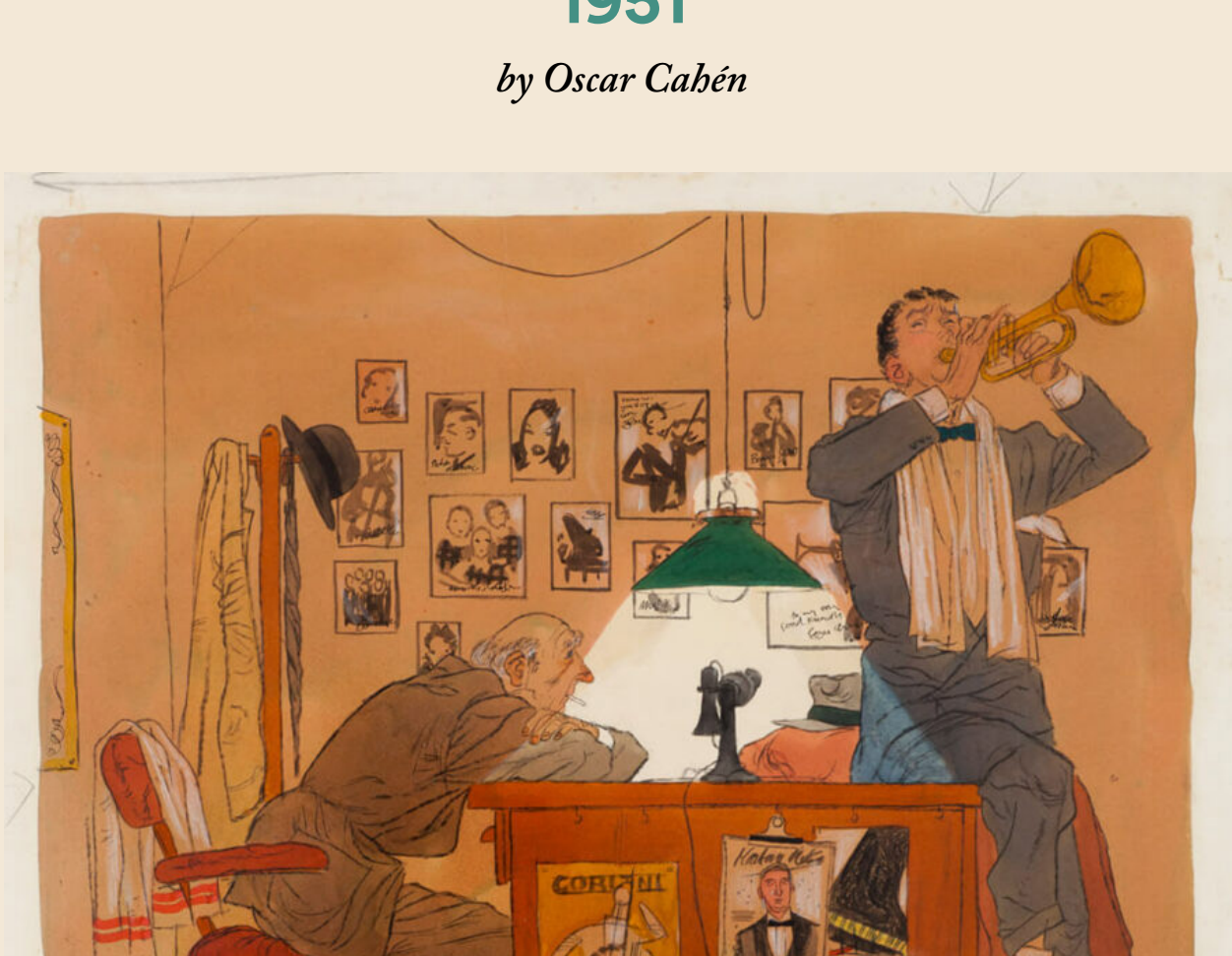
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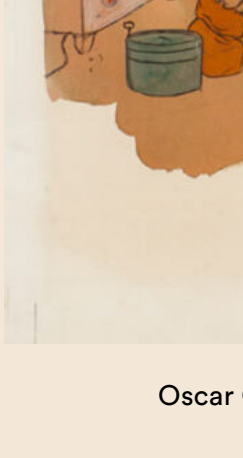
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JAZZ BAND, 1947

by Michael Snow



Michael Snow, *Jazz Band*, 1947, collection of the Estate of Michael Snow.

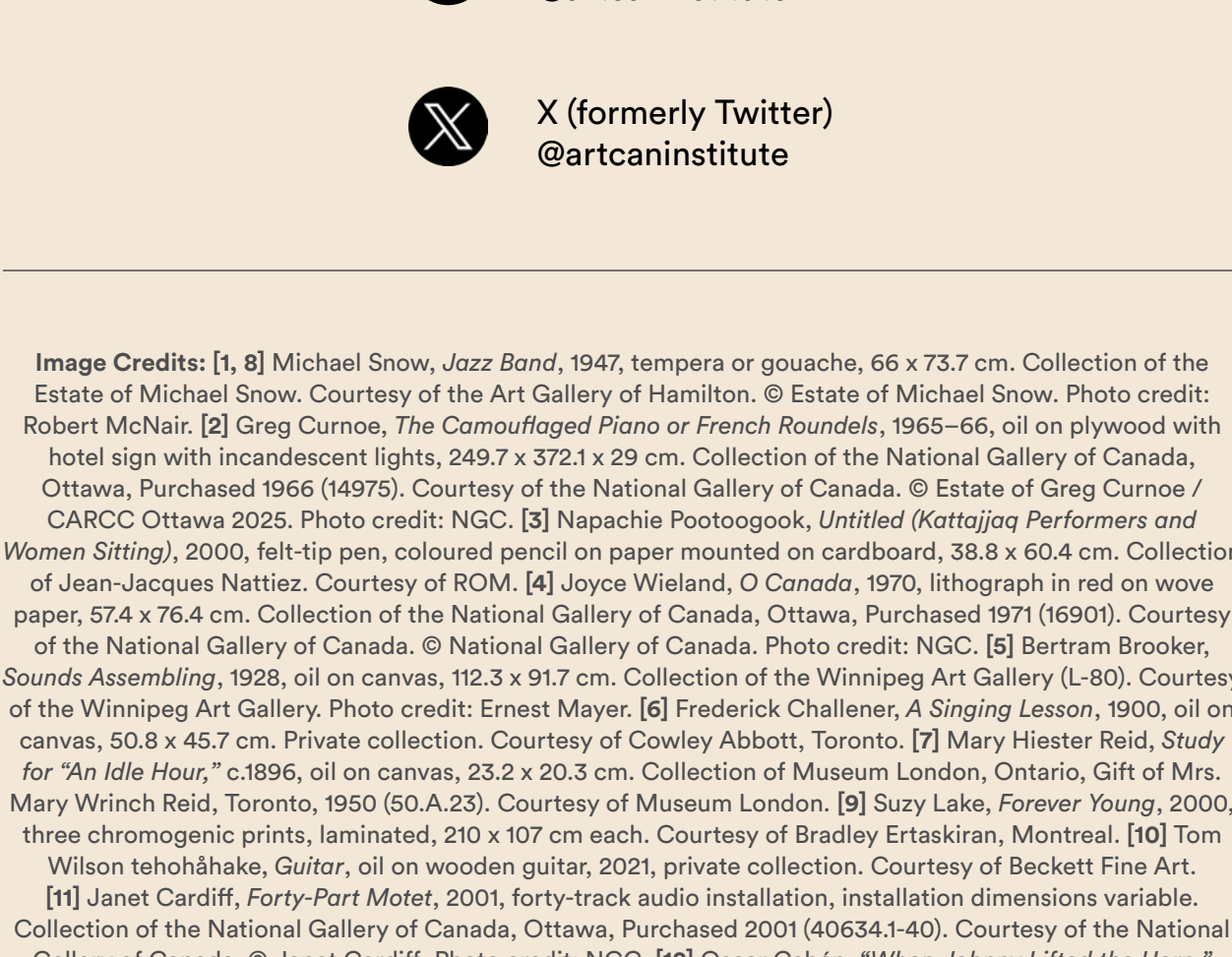


Legendary Toronto-born multidisciplinary artist Michael Snow (1928–2023) famously claimed in 1967, “My paintings are done by a filmmaker, sculpture by a musician, films by a musician, music by a sculptor... sometimes they all work together.” Music was central to his life and work, and he played piano with the famed artists' improv band CCMC, which he co-founded in 1973. As art historian Martha Langford notes in the Art Canada Institute book *Michael Snow: Life & Work*, *Jazz Band*, 1947, was painted before the artist reached twenty. Snow's joyfully wild piece shows the musicians' bodies stretched like puppet while the upright piano seems to be feeling the pianist's touch. It is a playful harbinger of the profound conceptual and visual wit that he would bring to his multifaceted oeuvre.

Read more in ACI's
[Michael Snow: Life & Work](#) by Martha Langford

FOREVER YOUNG, 2000

by Suzy Lake



Suzy Lake, *Forever Young*, 2000, courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal.



The photographic triptych *Forever Young*, 2000, features Suzy Lake (b.1947), then in her early fifties, posing mid-performance—dancing, singing, and with a guitar—in skintight leopard-print pants, chunky boots, and a revealing crop top as her pop star alter ego, Suzy Spice. Here Lake cleverly inserts herself into the then—hugely popular British band the Spice Girls, who peddled an easily digestible “girl power” brand of feminism. Juxtaposing so, Lake critically intervenes into celebrity culture and the obsession with youth. As author Erin Silver documents in her Art Canada Institute publication, *Suzy Lake: Life & Work*, the pioneering photo-based feminist artist was born in Detroit and moved to Montreal in 1968. Lake is best known for using the camera to examine identity, body image, beauty standards, and gender performance.

Read more in ACI's
[Suzy Lake: Life & Work](#) by Erin Silver

GUITAR, 2021

by Tom Wilson teohohâhake

Tom Wilson teohohâhake, *Guitar*, 2021, private collection.

Hamilton-born Tom Wilson teohohâhake (b.1959) is a celebrated musician (Junkhouse, Blackie & the Rodeo Kings, Lee Harvey Osmond) and artist who discovered his Mohawk heritage as an adult, a story he recounts in his 2017 memoir, *Beautiful Scars*. This painted guitar combines his passions for music, visual art, and Mohawk culture into a single beautifully crafted object. Its intricate detail evokes perseverance and resilience, and its three eyes suggest that the guitar is animate, capable of looking back at the audience as it is being played. “The same creative energy goes into the books I write, the music I make, and the art I create,” Wilson *explains*. “Everything is the same in my world.”

[Learn more about Tom Wilson](#)

FORTY-PART MOTET, 2001

by Janet Cardiff

Janet Cardiff, *Forty-Part Motet*, 2001, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

A highlight of the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa is its installation of the profoundly moving and immersive sound sculpture *Forty-Part Motet*, 2001, by the great Ontario-born artist Janet Cardiff (b.1957), in the historic Rideau Chapel. In this work, forty speakers are carefully arranged around the space, with each one carrying the single voice of a choir member performing English composer Thomas Tallis's *Spem in Alium* from 1573. Visitors can linger with one voice or step back to hear the full choir join together in ecstatic union. As they move from one to many, listeners, in the *artist's words*, experience an “overwhelming feeling as the sound waves hit [them] when all of the singers are singing.”

[Learn more about Janet Cardiff](#)

“WHEN JOHNNY LIFTED THE HORN,” 1951

by Oscar Cahén

Oscar Cahén, “When Johnny Lifted the Horn,” *Weekend Picture Magazine*, December 29, 1951, the Cahén Archives, Toronto.

This 1951 drawing by the Danish-born artist and illustrator Oscar Cahén (1916–1956) for *Weekend Picture Magazine* depicts an older man—perhaps an agent or someone who books musical performers—slumped over his desk inside a cluttered office as a younger man blasts away on his trumpet. Cahén's drawings are known for the levity seen here; the artist's son, Michael, *recalled* that music was always playing as his father worked, inspiring “a foot-tapping kind of mood.” As Jaleen Grove documents in her Art Canada Institute book, *Oscar Cahén: Life & Work*, Cahén was a Jewish refugee who emigrated from Europe to Montreal in 1940 and became part of the group Painters Eleven before dying tragically in a car crash at age forty.

Read more in ACI's
[Oscar Cahén: Life & Work](#) by Jaleen Grove

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Image Credits: [1, 8] Michael Snow, *Jazz Band*, 1947, tempera or gouache, 66 x 73.7 cm. Collection of the Estate of Michael Snow. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Hamilton. © Estate of Michael Snow. Photo credit: Robert McNeil. [2] Greg Curnoe, *The Camouflaged Piano or French Rounfels*, 1965–66, oil on plywood with hotel sign with incandescent lights, 249.7 x 372.1 x 29 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1966 (14975). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. © Estate of Greg Curnoe / CARCC Ottawa 2025. Photo credit: NGC. [3] Napachie Pootoogook, *Untitled (Kattajjaq Performers and Women Sitting)*, 2000, felt-tip pen, coloured pencil on paper, mounted on cardboard, 38.8 x 60.4 cm. Collection of Jean-Jacques Nattiez. Courtesy of ROM. [4] Joyce Wieland, *O Canada*, 1970, lithograph in red on wove paper, 57.4 x 76.4 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 1971 (16901). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. © National Gallery of Canada. Photo credit: NGC. [5] Bertram Brooker, *Sounds Assembling*, 1928, oil on canvas, 112.3 x 91.7 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery (L-80). Courtesy of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Photo credit: Ernest Mayer. [6] Frederick Challenger, *A Singing Lesson*, 1900, oil on canvas, 63.8 x 45.7 cm. Private collection. Courtesy of Cowley Abbott, Toronto. [7] Mary Hiester Reid, *Study for "An Idle Hour,"* c.1896, oil on canvas, 23.2 x 20.3 cm. Collection of Museum London, Ontario. Gift of Mrs. Mary Winch Reid, Toronto, 1950 (50.A.23). Courtesy of Museum London. [8] Suzy Lake, *Forever Young*, 2000, three chromogenic prints, laminated, 210 x 107 cm each. Courtesy of Bradley Ertaskiran, Montreal. [10] Tom Wilson teohohâhake, *Guitar*, oil on wooden guitar, 2021, private collection. Courtesy of Beckett Fine Art. [11] Janet Cardiff, *Forty-Part Motet*, 2001, forty-track audio installation, installation dimensions variable. Collection of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 2001 (140341-140). Courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada. © Janet Cardiff. Photo credit: NGC. [12] Oscar Cahén, “When Johnny Lifted the Horn,” *Weekend Picture Magazine*, December 29, 1951, gouache, watercolour, India ink, graphite on illustration board, 58.4 x 52.4 cm. Collection of The Cahén Archives, Toronto. Courtesy of The Cahén Archives. © The Cahén Archives.