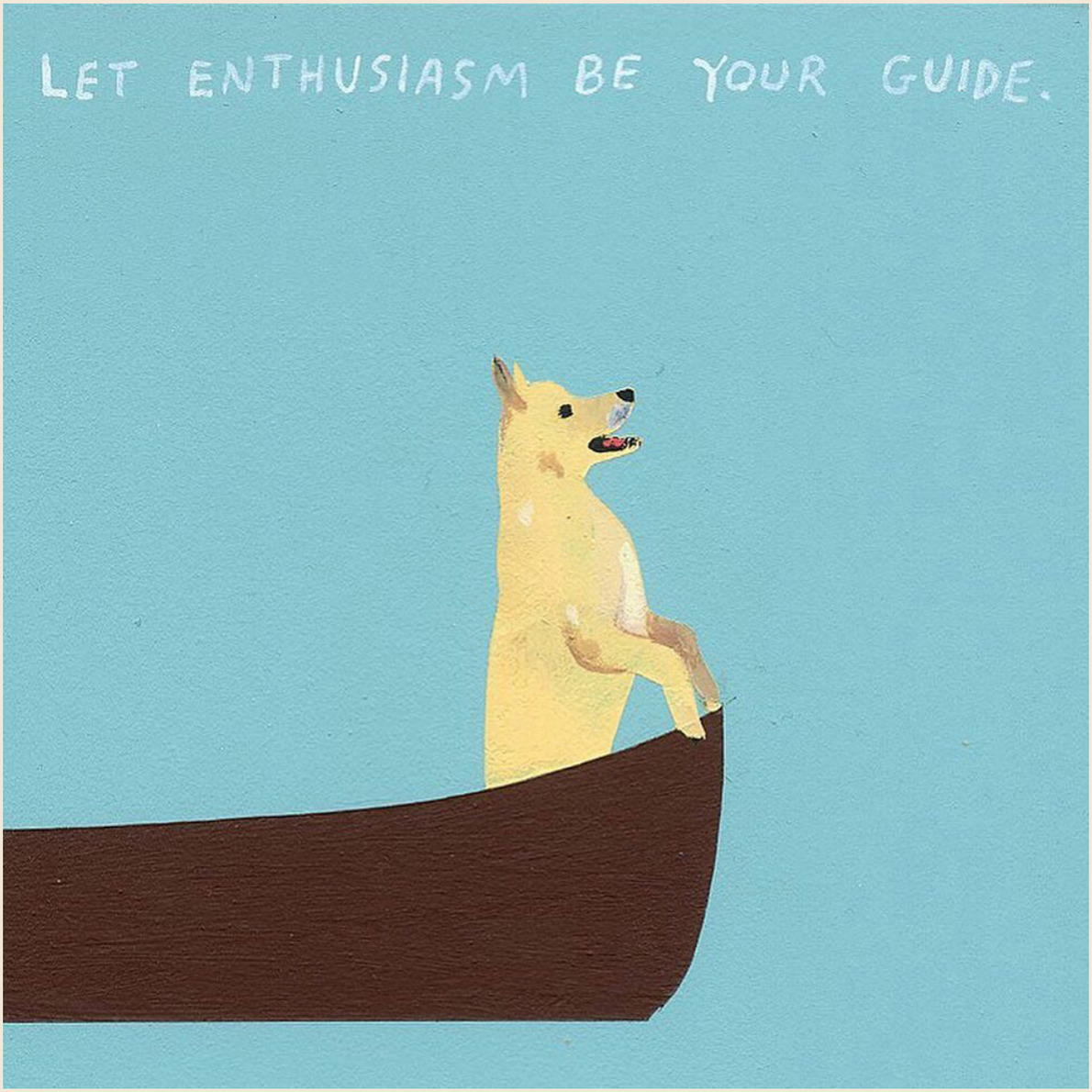
ART CANADA INSTITUTE | INSTITUT DE L'ART CANADIEN

MARCH 21, 2025

# WHO LET THE DOGS OUT? CANINES IN CANADIAN ART

*Puppies and Pooches as Muses.*




Michael Dumontier and Neil Farber, *Untitled*, 2023, courtesy of the artists.

Dogs have long held a cherished position in Canadian art. Since Sunday is National Puppy Day, we decided that there was no better time than now to look at how they have been depicted as steadfast guardians, working partners, travelling companions, and beloved pets. Often conveying loyalty, companionship, and strength, our canine friends have served as profound symbols for artists exploring themes of identity and resilience, and our connections to the natural world. From William Brymner's impressionistic portrayal of a small hound to General Idea's geometric presentation of poodles, here is how some of our nation's artists have portrayed the multifaceted forms and personalities of canines and their steadfast, unconditional love.

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

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# DOG DAY, 2020–21

*by Jack Bishop*

Jack Bishop, *Dog Day*, from the series Road Trip Playlist, 2020–21, courtesy of Newzones Gallery of Contemporary Art, Calgary, and the artist.

*Jack Bishop*

In this mesmerizing painting, Halifax artist Jack Bishop (b.1983) captures the simple joy of travelling with a furry companion. The dog, located in the backseat, is portrayed with minimal lines, playful shapes, and warm purple colours that evoke a sense of whimsy. Gazing out the window, the canine embodies a curious and carefree nature that feels familiar and jovial. Part of the Road Trip Playlist series, which documents the artist's travels along Canada's East Coast with his wife, the simplified and playful depiction of their pet reminds us of the joy and cherished companionship dogs bring to our travels and lives.

Learn more about Jack Bishop

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# SCENE IN THE NORTHWEST–PORTRAIT OF JOHN HENRY LEFROY, C.1845–46

*by Paul Kane*

Paul Kane, *Scene in the Northwest–Portrait of John Henry Lefroy*, c.1845–46, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

*Paul Kane*

Dog teams were essential to British scientist John Henry Lefroy's (1817–1890) successful exploration of the magnetic North. Irish-born Canadian painter Paul Kane (1810–1871) skillfully commemorates them in this detailed portrait. Presented as a group next to the sled, the artist portrays the canines as obedient and resilient in the snow-covered landscape: the brown dog lies in the snow with an attentive expression; the white dog stands behind, tongue out and tail slightly curled, evoking a sense of calm. Equipped with harnesses and bells, Kane depicts the dogs in a moment of rest yet still alert, capturing the strength and loyalty that contributed to Lefroy's triumphant expedition.

Read more in ACI's
*Paul Kane: Life & Work* by Arlene Gehmacher

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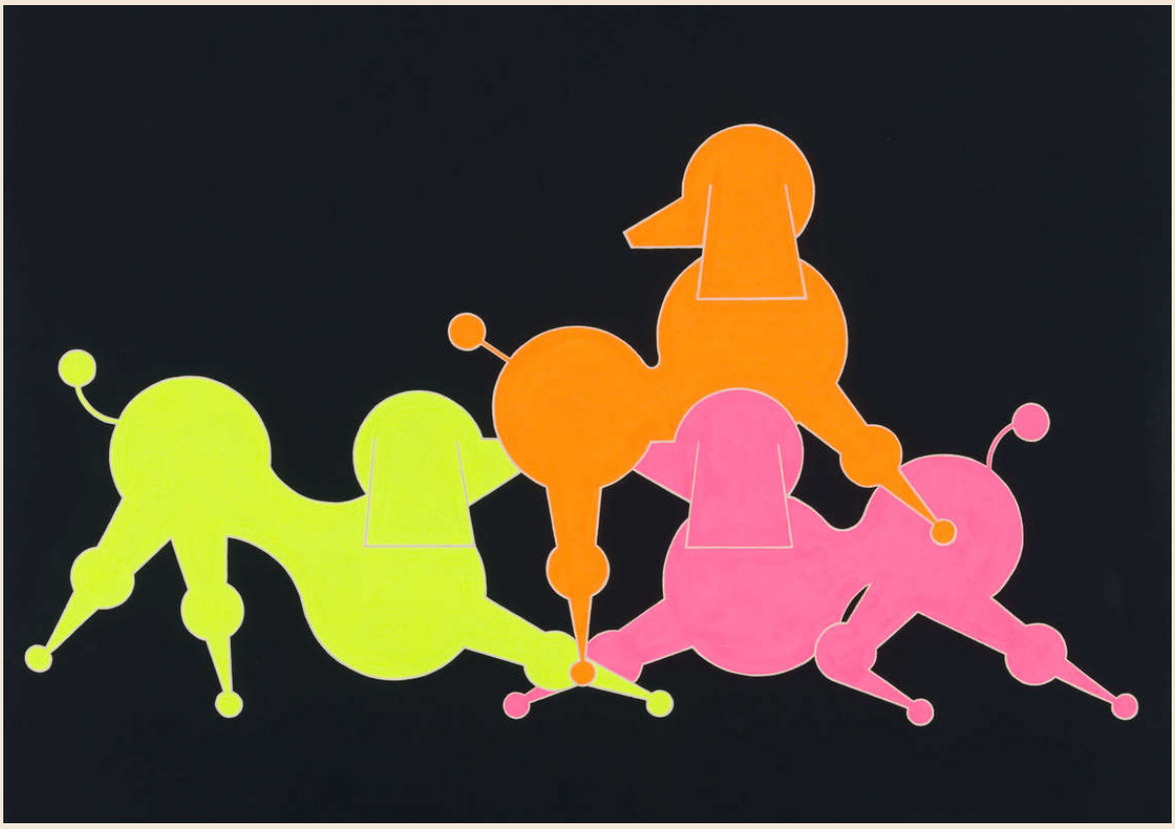
# MONDO CANE KAMA SUTRA, 1984

*by General Idea*



General Idea, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* (detail), 1984, Collection General Idea.

*General Idea*

The poodle is one of the most recognizable dog breeds, and for Toronto artist group General Idea, it was also the perfect animal to reference the group's own queer identity. In works like *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra*, 1984 (pictured above), the group depicts a trio of neon-coloured poodles using simple, geometric shapes to represent the silhouette of the iconic dog. The three canines' forms overlap and interconnect to suggest various sexual poses. Due to its "'banal and effete' presence," General Idea have consistently used the poodle in their art to investigate issues of self-representation and sexuality.

Read more in ACI's
*General Idea: Life & Work* by Sarah E.K. Smith

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# WELCOME TO THE STUDIO: AN ALLEGORY FOR

# ARTISTIC REFLECTION AND TRANSFORMATION, 2014

*by Kent Monkman*

Kent Monkman, *Welcome to the Studio: An Allegory for Artistic Reflection and Transformation* (detail), 2014, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

*Kent Monkman*

To create this monumental painting of his own studio, Cree artist Kent Monkman (b.1965) drew inspiration from various artistic sources, including photographs by Montreal artist William Notman (1826–1891) and the paintings of French artist Gustave Courbet (1819–1877). Situated in the lower-right foreground of *Welcome to the Studio*, 2014, perched atop an elegant ottoman, are three lapdogs. Monkman portrays the group with long, flowing coats and attentive expressions, adding a sense of refinement and companionship to the scene. These flashy canines implicitly allude to and investigate European painting traditions, where the inclusion of toy dogs often signified status or loyalty, contributing to the complexity of the scene.

Read more in ACI's
*Kent Monkman: Life & Work* by Shirley Madill

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# MISS H. FROTHINGHAM, 1871

*by William Notman*

William Notman, *Miss H. Frothingham*, Montreal, 1871, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

*William Notman*

In this captivating photograph, William Notman (1826–1891) skillfully attests to the bond between young Harriet Frothingham and her small dog. The shaggy canine sits securely and comfortably in Harriet's arms, evoking a sense of trust and protection. As the focal point of the photograph, Notman centres their warm relationship and foregrounds the importance of the dog to the girl's everyday life. This image is part of a series of portraits that the Scottish-born, Montreal-based artist created at the Frothingham home to capture the family's eccentricities and lively personalities.

Read more in ACI's
*William Notman: Life & Work* by Sarah Parsons

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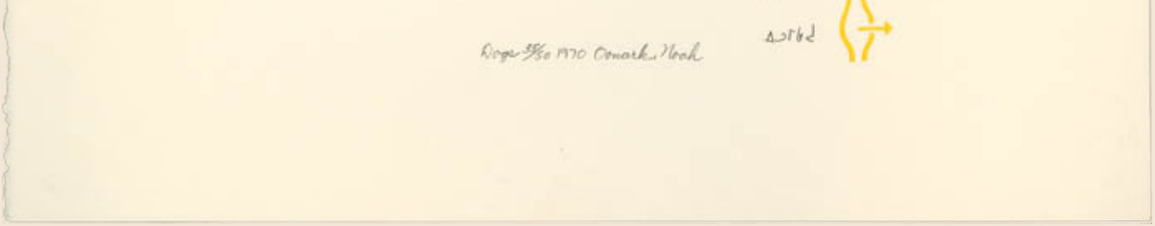
# DOGS, 1970

*by Jessie Oonark*



Jessie Oonark, *Dogs*, 1970, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

*Jessie Oonark*

Internationally recognized Inuit artist Jessie Oonark (1906–1985) was celebrated for her lively and colourful prints of animals in the Northern landscape–including dogs. This simple and playful work demonstrates her remarkable ability to imbue her canines with unique personalities using various colours, shapes, and artistic techniques. The artist presents three stylized dogs in a stacked arrangement, each with a different coat, pose, and facial expression. Through these various depictions, Oonark captures the diverse temperaments and moods our canine companions may have–from mysterious, to primal, to playful.

Learn more about Jessie Oonark

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# GIRL WITH A DOG, LOWER SAINT LAWRENCE, 1905

*by William Brymner*

William Brymner, *Girl with a Dog, Lower Saint Lawrence*, 1905, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

*William Brymner*

*Girl with a Dog, Lower Saint Lawrence*, 1905, exemplifies the masterful ability of William Brymner (1855–1925) to depict the subtle yet profound relationship between a pet and its human companion using an impressionistic style. Through loose brushstrokes and a simple, recognizable form, the Scottish-born, Montreal-based artist portrays the small dog sitting attentively next to the girl. With its perked up ears and alert expression, Brymner foregrounds an important role that dogs often play in our lives: the ever-watchful protector, regardless of size. A leading figure in Canadian art, Brymner made significant contributions to Impressionism in Canada and Canadian art as a whole.

Read more in ACI's
*William Brymner: Life & Work* by Jocelyn Anderson

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# VERANDAH, 1983

*by Alex Colville*

Alex Colville, *Verandah*, 1983, private collection.

*Alex Colville*

Renowned Maritime artist Alex Colville (1920–2013) expertly adds tension to *Verandah*, pictured above, through the presence of a black dog. He depicts the canine in a resting position, sprawled on the floor between a table and chair, which are occupied by its human companions. Through the dog's pose, the artist subtly creates a sense of unease. Colville consistently portrayed animals in his works, often using dogs to illuminate the contrasts between animals and humans, or nature and human-made constructs.

Read more in ACI's
*Alex Colville: Life & Work* by Ray Cronin

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# DOG AMONG THE RUINS, 1947

*by Jack Shadbolt*

Jack Shadbolt, *Dog Among the Ruins*, 1947, Art Gallery of Greater Victoria.

*Jack Shadbolt*

This intense image of a howling dog is part of a series of works Jack Shadbolt (1909–1998) created after witnessing the horrors of the Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald concentration camps through photographs. Using bold lines and a muted colour palette, the English-born artist portrays a lone hound amid shattered structures and smoke. Its monstrous form dominates the scene, and with its head thrown back in a piercing howl, conveys an overwhelming sense of anguish in the devastation. Through this unsettling depiction, Shadbolt powerfully expresses his own feelings of anger and despair in times of crisis.

Read more in ACI's
*War Art in Canada: A Critical History* by Laura Brandon

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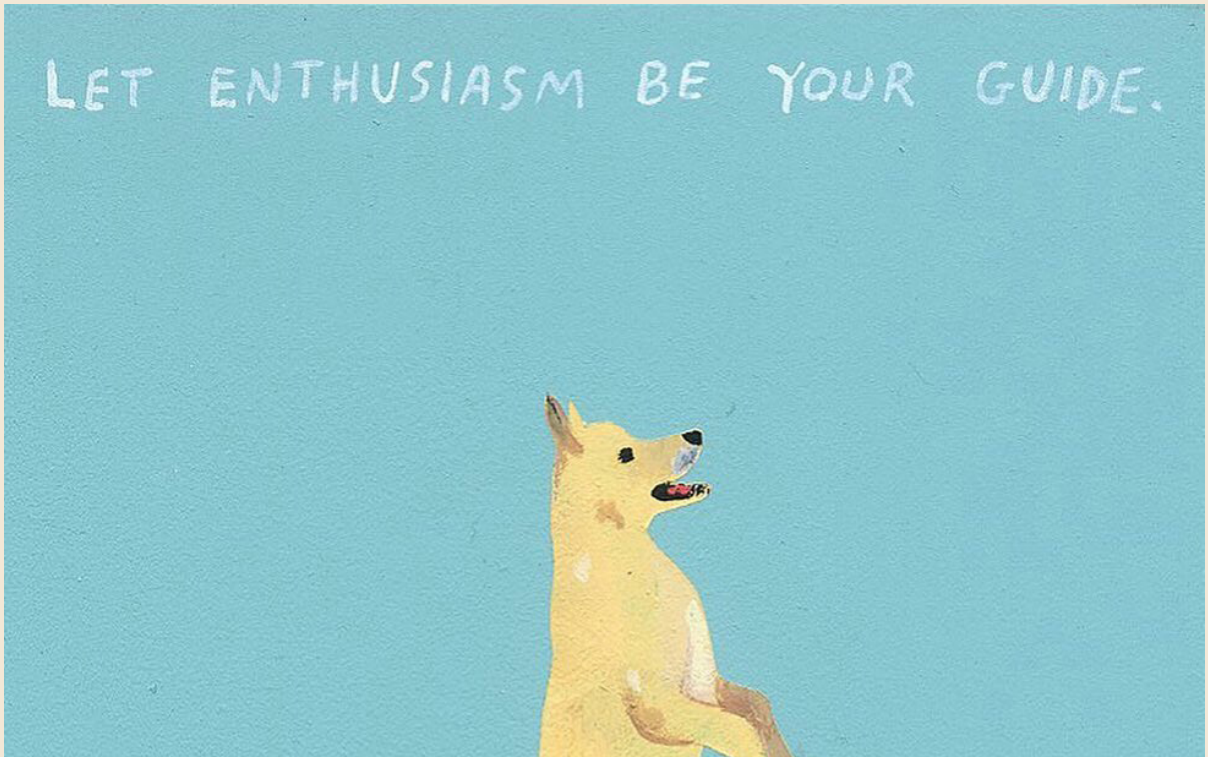
## UNTITLED, 2023

*by Michael Dumontier and Neil Farber*



Michael Dumontier and Neil Farber, *Untitled*, 2023, courtesy of the artists.

*Michael Dumontier* *Neil Farber*

In *Untitled*, Winnipeg-based artist duo Michael Dumontier (b.1974) and Neil Farber (b.1975) skillfully capture the wisdom and love that dogs bring to our lives. Using simple shapes and vibrant colours, the duo depicts a yellow dog perched eagerly at the front of a boat, gazing ahead in anticipation of a new adventure. With the inclusion of the phrase "Let enthusiasm be your guide," the artists craft a charming and uplifting scene, and through it, they invite us to embrace life as our furry companions do—with open hearts and generosity of spirit.

Learn more about
Michael Dumontier and Neil Farber

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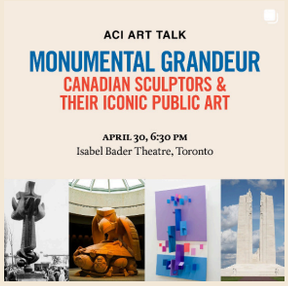

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**Image Credits: [1, 11]** Michael Dumontier and Neil Farber, *Untitled*, 2023. Courtesy of the artists. **[2]** Jack Bishop, *Dog Day*, from the series Road Trip Playlist, 2020–21. Courtesy of Newzones Gallery of Contemporary Art, Calgary, and the artist. **[3]** Paul Kane, *Scene in the Northwest–Portrait of John Henry Lefroy*, c.1845–46, oil on canvas, 55.5 x 76 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, The Thomson Collection at the Art Gallery of Ontario (2009/507). Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Ontario. Photo © AGO. **[4]** General Idea, *Mondo Cane Kama Sutra* (detail), 1984, fluorescent acrylic on canvas, 243.8 x 304.8 x 10 cm. Collection General Idea. © General Idea. Photo credit: General Idea. **[5]** Kent Monkman, *Welcome to the Studio: An Allegory for Artistic Reflection and Transformation* (detail), 2014, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 730 cm, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal. Courtesy of the McCord Stewart Museum. © Kent Monkman. **[6]** William Notman, *Miss H. Frothingham*, Montreal, 1871, silver salts on glass, wet collodion process, 25 x 20 cm. Collection of the McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal, purchase from Associated Screen News Ltd. (I-65141). Courtesy of the McCord Stewart Museum. **[7]** Jessie Oonark, *Dogs*, 1970, stencil, 50.9 x 32.9 cm. Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Professor Sandra Freedman Witelson (inv.2008.278). Courtesy of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. © Public Trustee of Nunavut, Estate of Jessie Oonark. **[8]** William Brymner, *Girl with a Dog, Lower Saint Lawrence*, 1905, oil on canvas, 48.5 x 60.5 cm. Collection of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Gift of Sarah Humphrey and Gerald van Gurp in honour of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts' 150th anniversary (2012.46). Courtesy of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Photo credit: MMFA, Christine Guest. **[9]** Alex Colville, *Verandah*, 1983, acrylic polymer emulsion on Masonite, 80 x 80 cm. Private collection. © A.C. Fine Art Inc. **[10]** Jack Shadbolt, *Dog Among the Ruins*, 1947, watercolour and carbon pencil on wove paper, 78.2 x 56.9 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (1980.069.001). Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. © courtesy of Simon Fraser University Galleries, Burnaby.