

MARCH 20, 2026

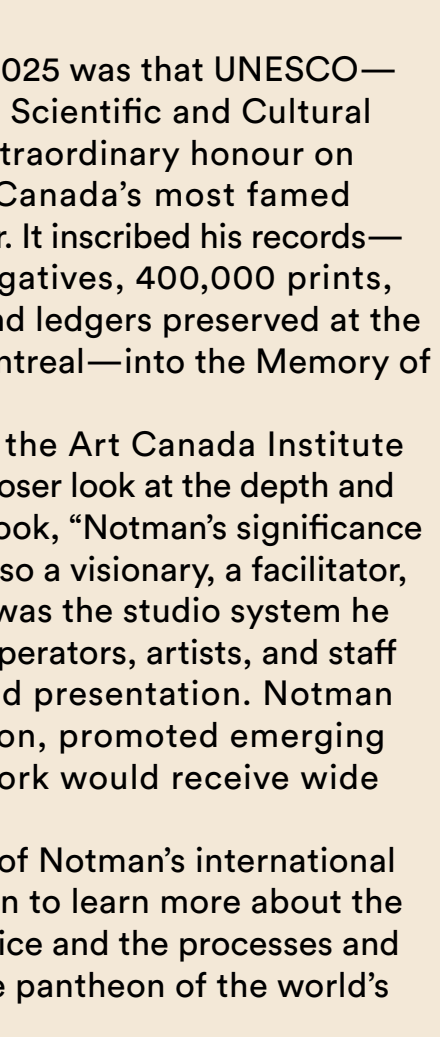
BUILDING CANADA, ONE PHOTO AT A TIME

WILLIAM NOTMAN'S CELEBRATED ARCHIVE

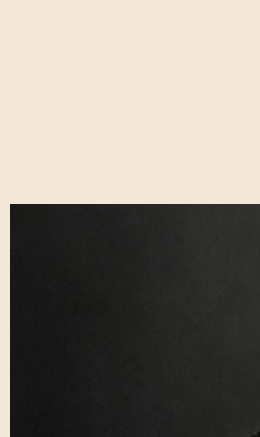
Why the records and works of Montreal's famed photographer received a revered UNESCO designation.



William Notman, *Chaudière Falls*, Ottawa, 1870, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.



Wm. Notman & Son, *The Bounce, Montreal Snowshoe Club*, 1886, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.



Sarah Parsons

A Canadian cultural highlight of 2025 was that UNESCO—the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization—bestowed an extraordinary honour on William Notman (1826–1891), Canada's most famed nineteenth-century photographer. It inscribed his records—namely, 200,000 glass plate negatives, 400,000 prints, and hundreds of record books and ledgers preserved at the McCord Stewart Museum in Montreal—into the Memory of the World International Register.

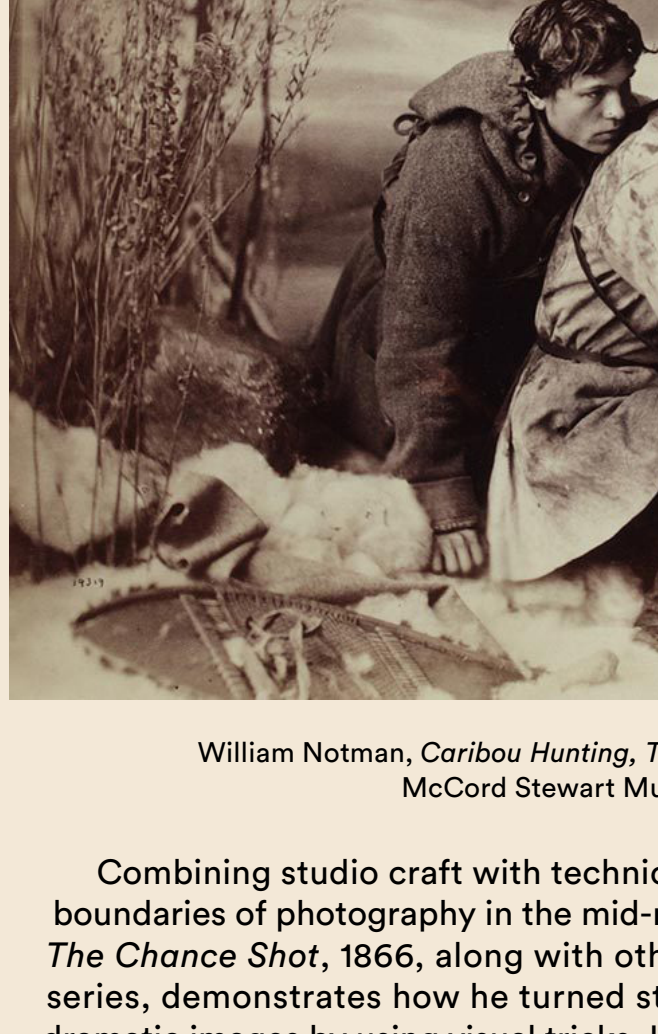
This week, we asked Sarah Parsons, author of the Art Canada Institute publication *William Notman: Life & Work*, to offer a closer look at the depth and breadth of the artist's archive. As she writes in her book, "Notman's significance cannot be limited to that of photographer. He was also a visionary, a facilitator, and the creator of a brand." Central to his success was the studio system he built—carefully assembled teams of photographic operators, artists, and staff who shaped every aspect of image production and presentation. Notman actively encouraged technological experimentation, promoted emerging photographic techniques, and ensured that his work would receive wide circulation and publicity.

UNESCO's designation underscores the impact of Notman's international legacy in changing the course of art history. Read on to learn more about the works that shaped the innovative Montrealer's practice and the processes and technical innovations that earned him a place in the pantheon of the world's greatest artists.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

AN ARTIST AND AN ENTREPRENEUR



William Notman, *William Notman, Photographer*, 1868, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

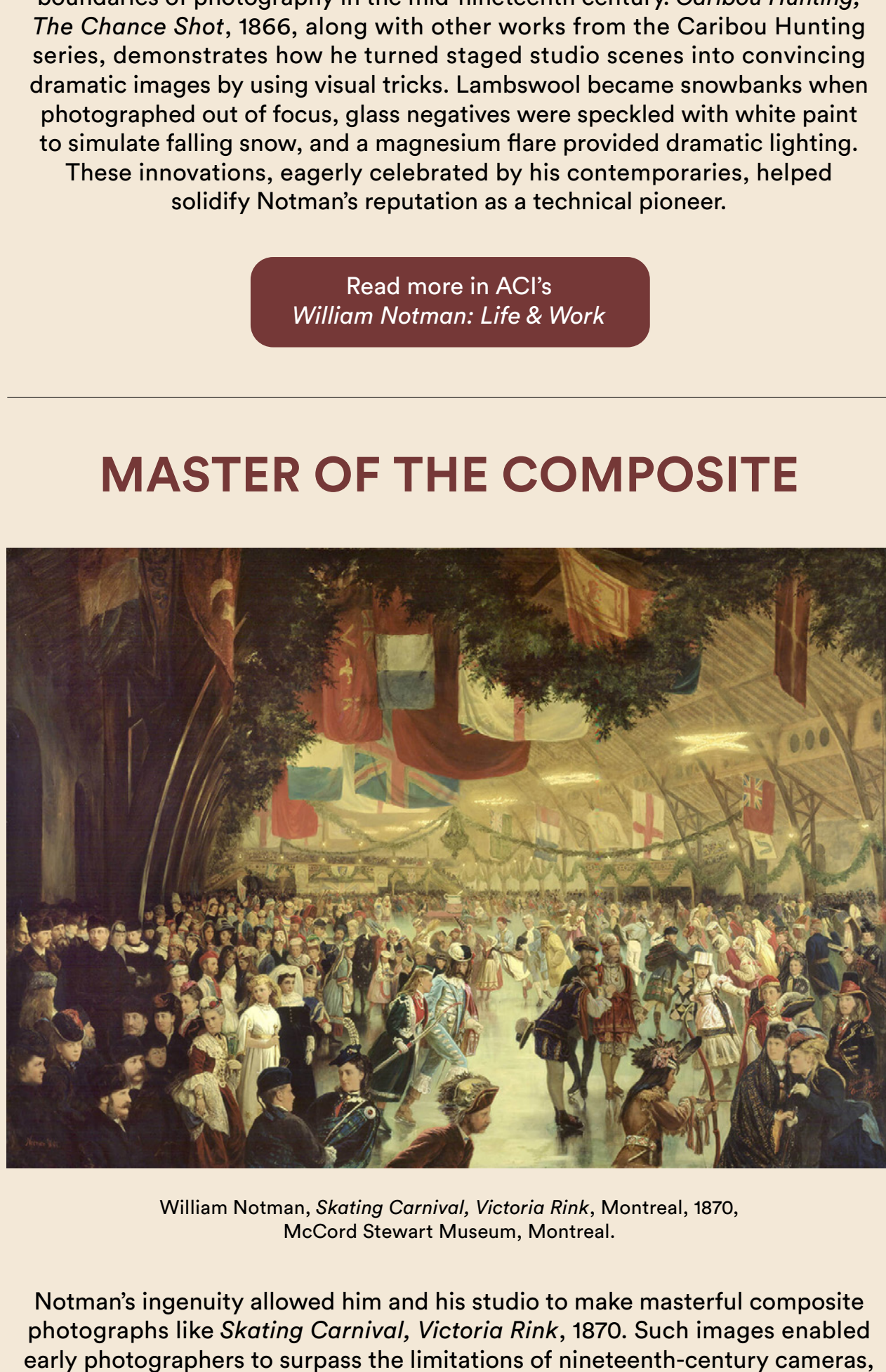


William Notman, *Photography: Things You Ought to Know*, after 1867, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

Drawing on his artistic sensibility and entrepreneurial ingenuity, Notman understood the business potential of photography. After arriving in Montreal from Scotland in 1856, he established a small studio on Bleury Street that quickly grew into a profitable enterprise serving the city's commercial and political elite. From the outset, Notman was strategic about promoting his work. A pivotal moment came in 1858, when he secured the commission to document the building of the Grand Trunk Railway's Victoria Bridge. He presented a lavish box of the photographs to Queen Victoria, who named him "Photographer to the Queen"—a title he immediately folded into his marketing. He also built a coordinated studio system, cultivating loyalty through fair pay and opportunities for advancement. At its height, as Parsons notes, "Notman's name was on twenty studios."

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

THE TECHNICAL INNOVATOR



William Notman, *Caribou Hunting, The Chance Shot*, Montreal, 1866, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

Combining studio craft with technical ingenuity, Notman pushed the boundaries of photography in the mid-nineteenth century. *Caribou Hunting, The Chance Shot*, 1866, along with other works from the *Caribou Hunting* series, demonstrates how he turned staged studio scenes into convincing dramatic images by using visual tricks. Lambswool became snowbanks when photographed out of focus, glass negatives were speckled with white paint to simulate falling snow, and a magnesium flare provided dramatic lighting. These innovations, eagerly celebrated by his contemporaries, helped solidify Notman's reputation as a technical pioneer.

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

MASTER OF THE COMPOSITE



William Notman, *Skating Carnival, Victoria Rink*, Montreal, 1870, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

Notman's ingenuity allowed him and his studio to make masterful composite photographs like *Skating Carnival, Victoria Rink*, 1870. Such images enabled early photographers to surpass the limitations of nineteenth-century cameras, combining multiple negatives into a single print for narrative purposes. *Skating Carnival, Victoria Rink* includes portraits of more than three hundred individuals. For this work, Notman individually photographed sitters in the studio, cut out their prints, and assembled them onto a composite negative before printing the final scene. This painstaking method allowed him to choreograph a crowded rink with impossible clarity and control, showcasing the theatrical possibilities of early photography.

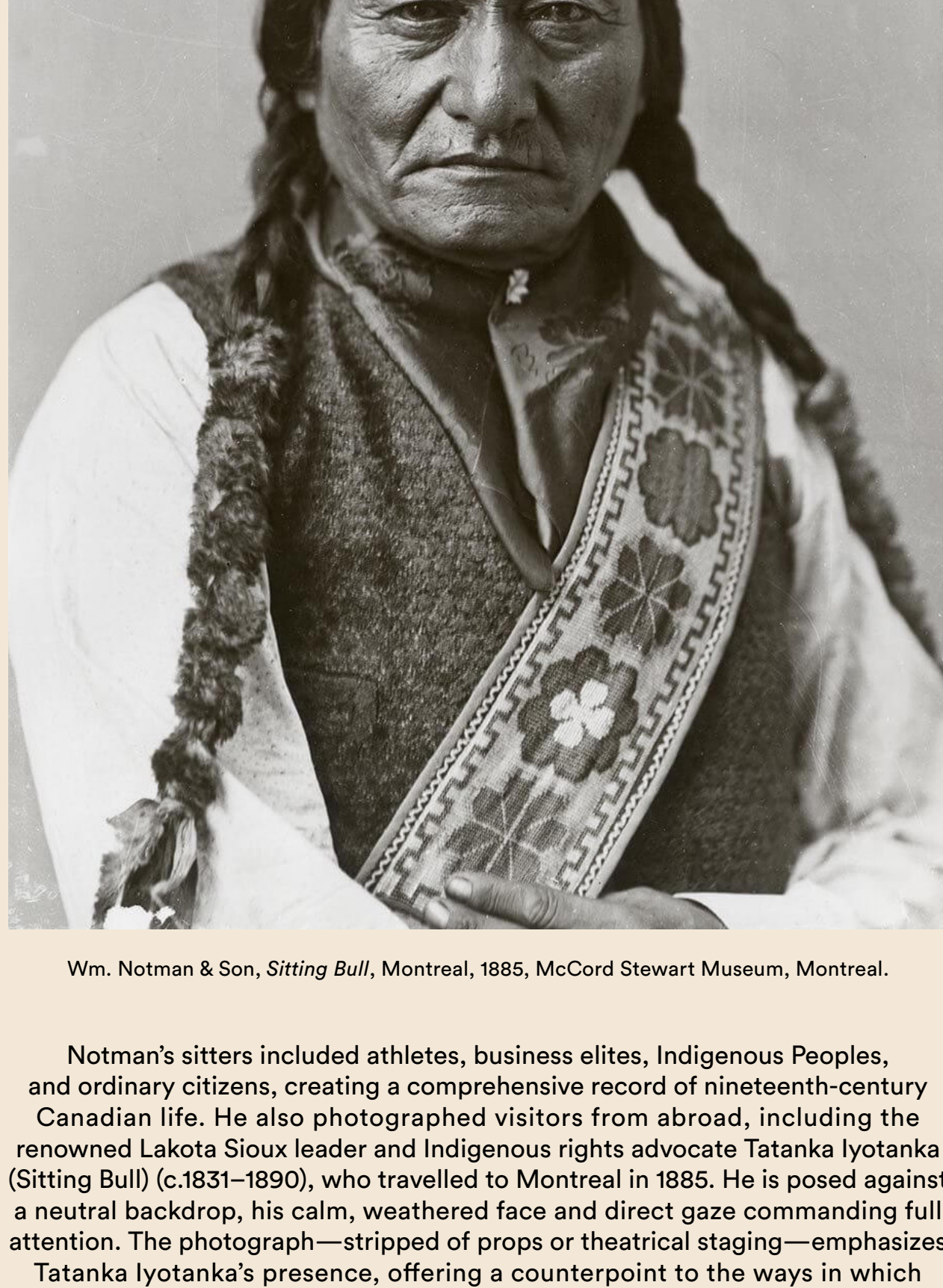
Read more in ACI's *William Notman: Life & Work*



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DIRECTING THE MOMENT

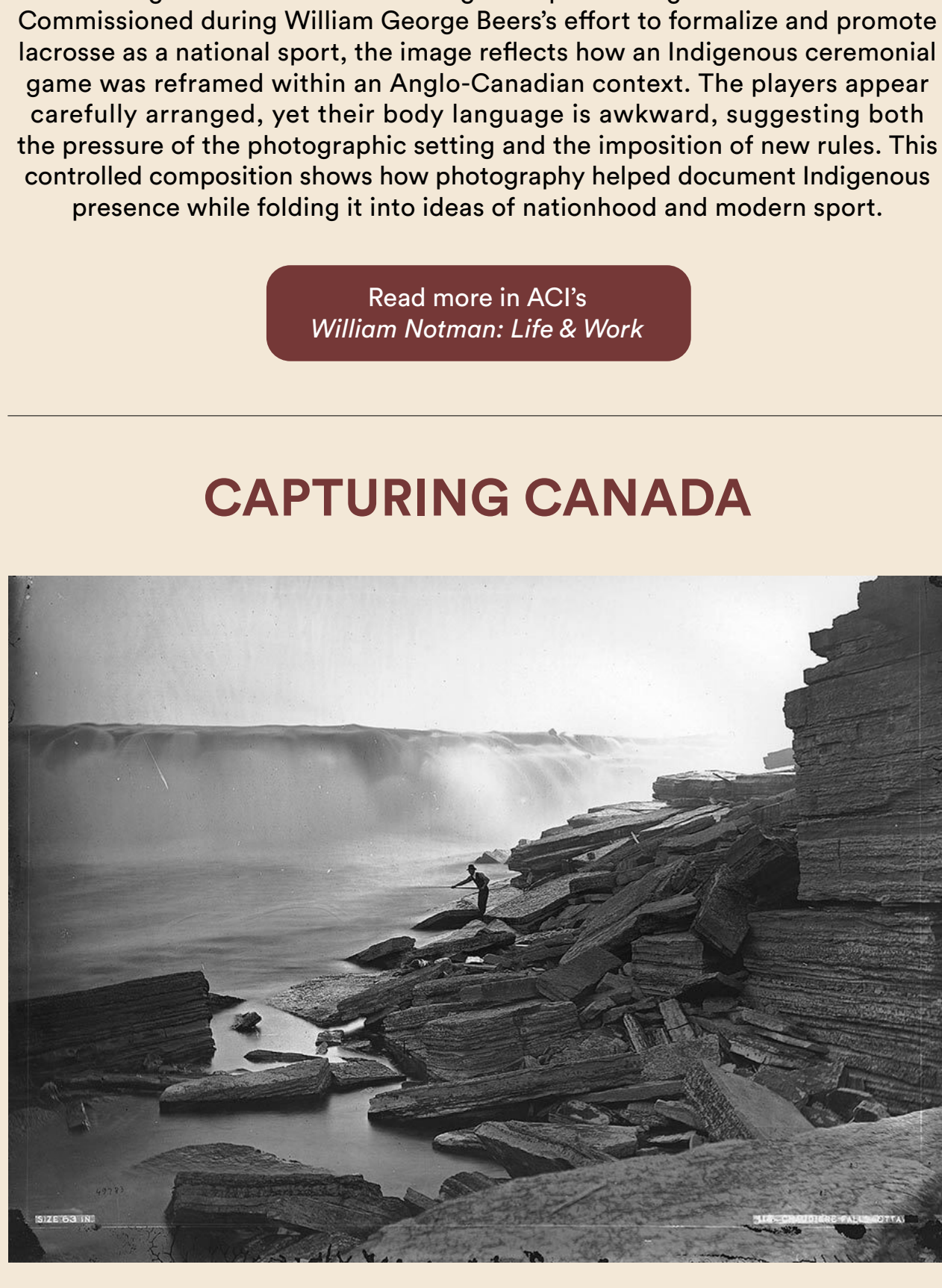


William Notman, *Miss H. Frothingham*, Montreal, 1871, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

Rather than wait for moments to unfold, Notman actively shaped them, using pose and gesture to produce portraits that feel both natural and carefully composed. The Frothinghams were a prominent Montreal business family, and the portraits taken at their country home reveal how Notman experimented beyond studio conventions. The calm, direct gaze of young Harriet Frothingham anchors the composition of the portrait above. Her small stature is balanced against the surrounding architectural elements. By emphasizing character and ease over strict Victorian formality, Notman orchestrated intimacy and play—demonstrating how technical control and direction were central to his photographic practice.

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

AUTHORITY IN PORTRAITURE



Wm. Notman & Son, *Sitting Bull*, Montreal, 1885, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

Notman's sitters included athletes, business elites, Indigenous Peoples, and ordinary citizens, creating a comprehensive record of nineteenth-century Canadian life. He also photographed visitors from abroad, including the renowned Lakota Sioux leader and Indigenous rights advocate Tatanka Iyotanka (*Sitting Bull*) (c.1831–1890), who travelled to Montreal in 1885. He is posed against a neutral backdrop, his calm, weathered face and direct gaze commanding full attention. The photograph—stripped of props or theatrical staging—emphasizes Tatanka Iyotanka's presence, offering a counterpoint to the ways in which Indigenous Peoples were often objectified in nineteenth-century ethnographic photography. Notman's approach combines technical skill with cultural sensitivity, producing a visually and historically resonant image.

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

NATION BUILDING



William Notman, *St. Regis Lacrosse Club*, Montreal, 1867, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

Notman's photograph *St. Regis Lacrosse Club*, 1867, captures a moment when Indigenous tradition was being reshaped through colonial influence. Commissioned during William George Beers's effort to formalize and promote lacrosse as a national sport, the image reflects how an Indigenous ceremonial game was reframed within an Anglo-Canadian context. The players appear carefully arranged, yet their body language is awkward, suggesting both the pressure of the photographic setting and the imposition of new rules. This controlled composition shows how photography helped document Indigenous presence while folding it into ideas of nationhood and modern sport.

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

CAPTURING CANADA



William Notman, *Chaudière Falls*, Ottawa, 1870, McCord Stewart Museum, Montreal.

Scenic views—created to appeal to tourists, collectors, and local audiences while showcasing Canada's picturesque landscapes—were central to Notman's commercial success. While many photographic studios in Canada offered specialized regional coverage, Notman's approach was nationally ambitious. His studio produced images, such as *Chaudière Falls*, that reinforced his reputation locally and internationally. Carefully composed and visually striking, the photograph highlights the power of the falls while also displaying Notman's technical skill. Through images like these, Notman transformed Canadian landscapes into marketable and culturally resonant images.

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

NOTMAN'S LEGACY



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

Notman's photographic works remain active reference points in contemporary artistic practice. Multidisciplinary Cree artist Kent Monkman (b.1965) revisits this legacy in *Welcome to the Studio: An Allegory for Artistic Reflection and Transformation*, 2014, which reimagines Notman's nineteenth-century photographic studio. Monkman places his alter ego, Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, at the centre of the scene and inserts Indigenous figures into the studio space. The painting playfully and critically engages with key images in Notman's archive, referencing works such as the Indigenous lacrosse photographs and the *Caribou Hunting* series while exposing the colonial framing of these images and questioning the histories they have helped shape.

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

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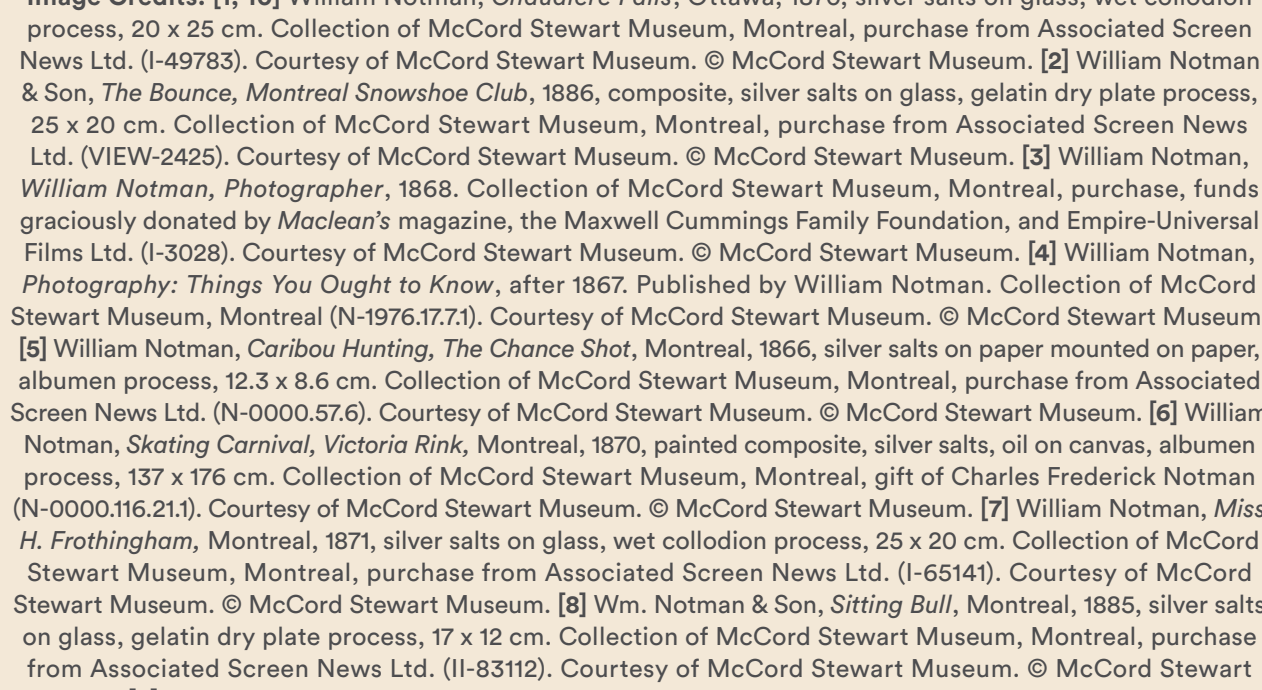


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