

JULY 12, 2024

CANOE ART IN CANADA A CENTURIES-LONG LEGACY

A look at the canoe as a meaningful visual symbol for countless generations of artists and craftspeople.



Kim Dorland, *Untitled (Painter in a Canoe)*, 2013, private collection.



More than just a leisure craft, the canoe is a Canadian cultural icon that carries complex and divergent connotations. It is a symbol of Indigenous ingenuity and resilience as well as a historical signifier of settler colonialism that has been employed as a tool of both diplomacy and displacement.

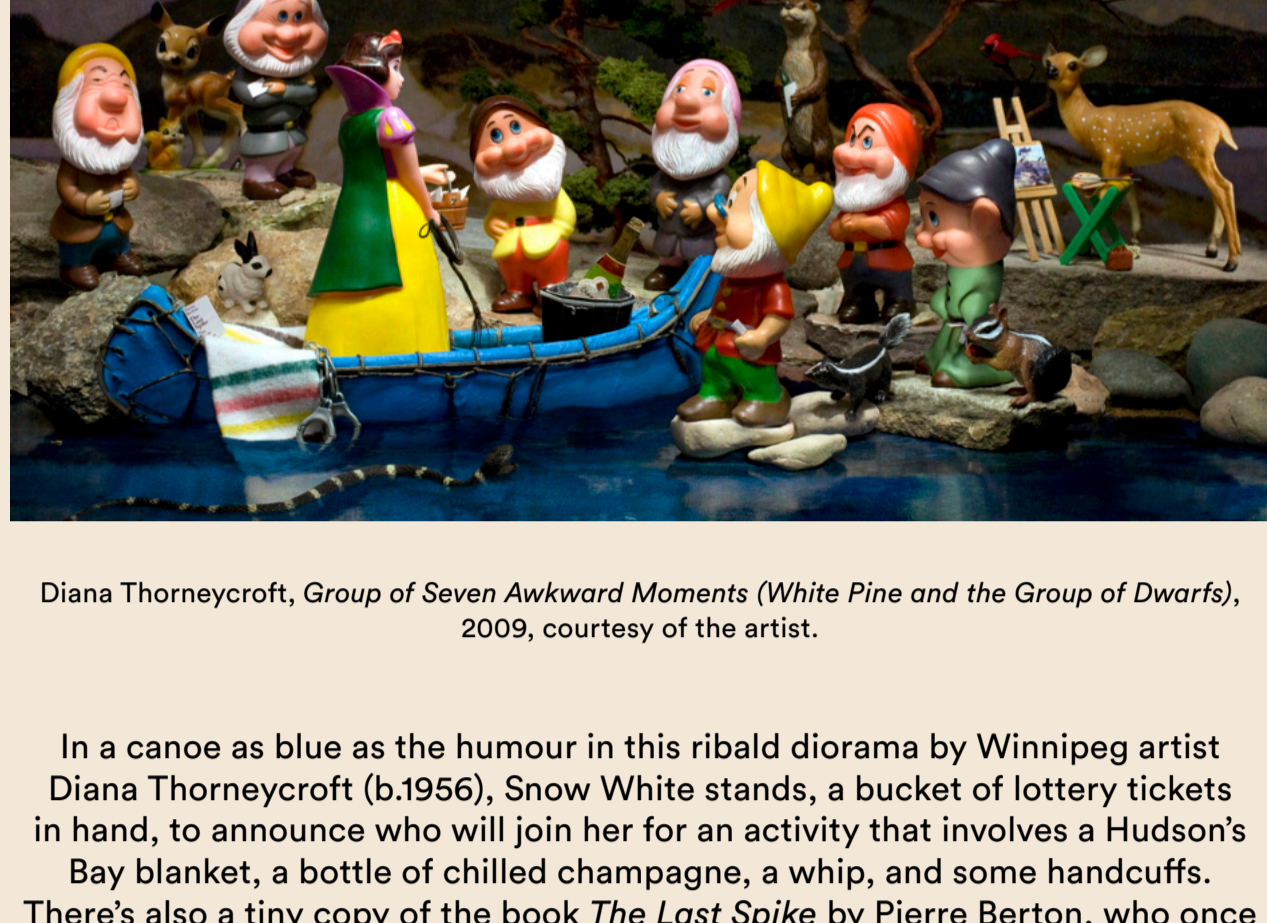
It's no wonder, then, that the canoe has had such enduring appeal as subject matter for Canadian artists, ten of whose works themed on watercraft are featured in our selection below. If you find yourself making a canoe trip this summer—there is perhaps no better vantage point from which to take in the beauty of the season—there is perhaps no better way to think of the vessel's storied legacy and its rightful claim as a work of art in itself.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

LOO TAAS

by *Iijuwaa Bill Reid*



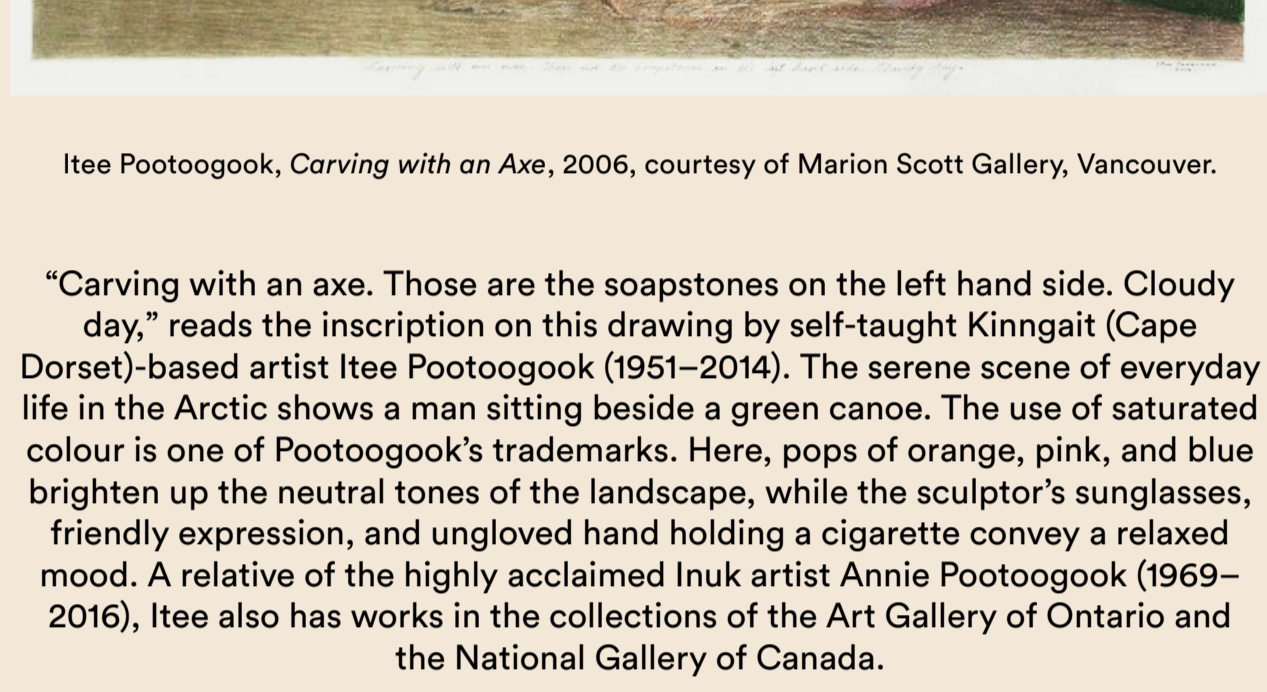
Iijuwaa Bill Reid, *Loo Taas*, 1986, being paddled at the opening of the Haida Heritage Centre at Kay Linnagsay in 2007, photograph by J. Baird.

Hugely influential Haida artist Iijuwaa Bill Reid (1920–1998) once **declared**, “Western art starts with the figure—West Coast Indian art starts with the canoe.” In 1986, inspired by a painting he saw by his great-great-uncle Daxhiigang (Charles Edenshaw, 1839–1920), Reid designed *Loo Taas*, a 15.2-metre canoe carved from red cedar whose name means “wave eater.” Reid spent his life and career seeking out ways to reconnect with his cultural heritage, a link severed in childhood by the Indian Act. *Loo Taas* helped him and many other Haida people keep the legacy of their ancestors alive—and even served as the vessel to carry Reid’s ashes to his burial site. *Loo Taas* made her maiden voyage at Expo 86 in Vancouver.

Read more in ACI’s [Iijuwaa Bill Reid: Life & Work](#) by Gerald McMaster

GROUP OF SEVEN AWKWARD MOMENTS

by *Diana Thorncroft*



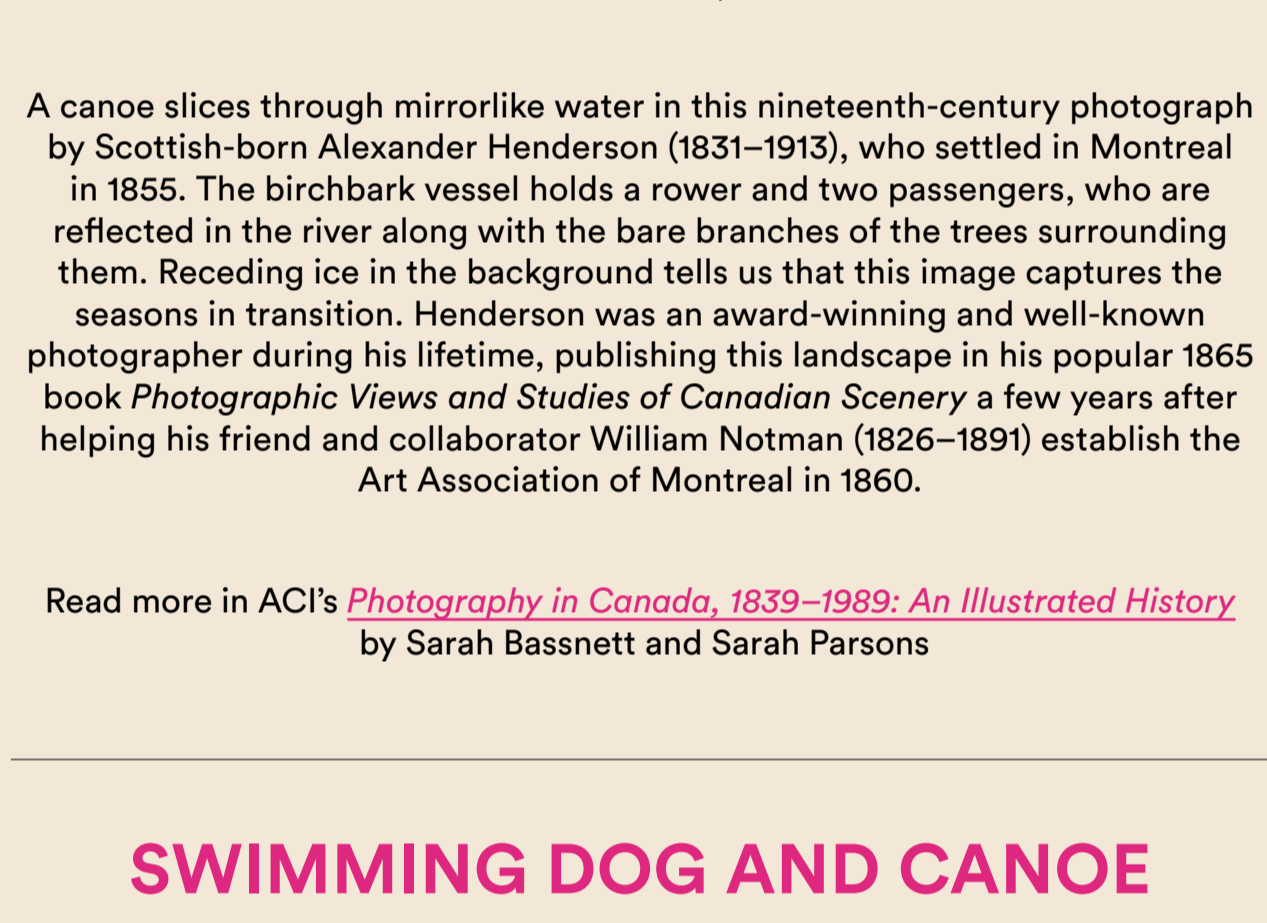
Diana Thorncroft, *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (White Pine and the Group of Dwarfs)*, 2009, courtesy of the artist.

In a canoe as blue as the humour in this ribald diorama by Winnipeg artist Diana Thorncroft (b.1956), Snow White stands, a bucket of lottery tickets in hand, to announce who will join her for an activity that involves a Hudson’s Bay blanket, a bottle of chilled champagne, a whip, and some handcuffs. There’s also a tiny copy of the book *The Last Spike* by Pierre Berton, who once **quipped**, “A Canadian is somebody who knows how to make love in a canoe.” The scene’s backdrop references the painting *White Pine*, c.1957, by A.J. Casson (1898–1992) of the Group of Seven, whose members matched Disney’s dwarves in number—another inside joke satirizing Canada’s nation-building efforts in this clever and controversial artwork.

[Learn more about Diana Thorncroft](#)

CARVING WITH AN AXE

by *Itee Pootoogook*



Itee Pootoogook, *Carving with an Axe*, 2006, courtesy of Marion Scott Gallery, Vancouver.

“Carving with an axe. Those are the soapstones on the left hand side. Cloudy day,” reads the inscription on this drawing by self-taught Kingkait (Cape Dorset)-based artist Itee Pootoogook (1920–2013) and his wife, Rhoda—who glide along the water in the Arctic shows a man sitting beside a green canoe. The serene scene of everyday life in the Arctic is one of Pootoogook’s trademarks. Here, pops of orange, pink, and blue brighten up the neutral tones of the landscape, while the sculptor’s sunglasses, friendly expression, and ungloried hand holding a cigarette convey a relaxed mood. A relative of the highly acclaimed Inuk artist Annie Pootoogook (1969–2016), Itee also has works in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario and the National Gallery of Canada.

[Learn more about Itee Pootoogook](#)

SPRING INUNDATION ON SAINT LAWRENCE RIVER NEAR MONTREAL, QUEBEC

by *Alexander Henderson*



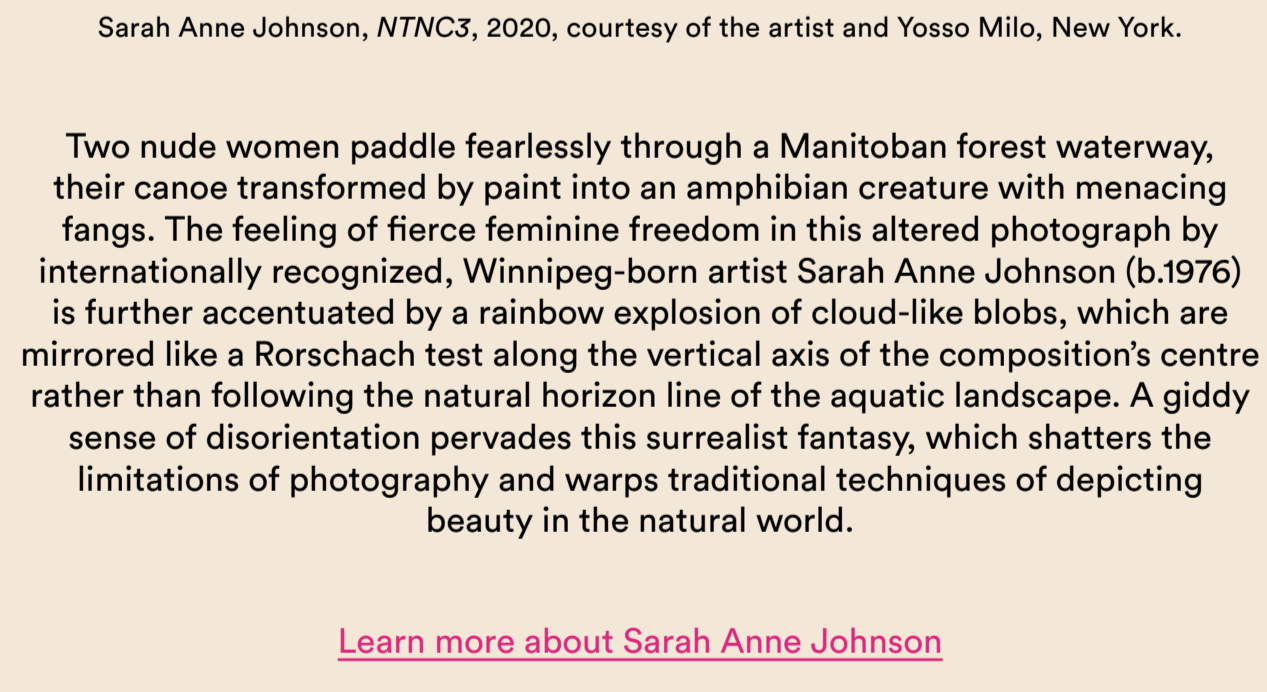
Alexander Henderson, *Spring Inundation on Saint Lawrence River near Montreal, Quebec*, c.1865, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

A canoe slices through mirrorlike water in this nineteenth-century photograph by Scottish-born Alexander Henderson (1831–1913), who settled in Montreal in 1855. The birchbark vessel holds a rower and two passengers, who are reflected in the river along with the bare branches of the trees surrounding them. Receding ice in the background tells us that this image captures the seasons in transition. Henderson was an award-winning and well-known photographer during his lifetime, publishing this landscape in his popular 1865 book *Photographic Views and Studies of Canadian Scenery* a few years after helping his friend and collaborator William Notman (1826–1891) establish the Art Association of Montreal in 1860.

Read more in ACI’s [Photography in Canada, 1839–1989: An Illustrated History](#) by Sarah Bassnett and Sarah Parsons

SWIMMING DOG AND CANOE

by *Alex Colville*



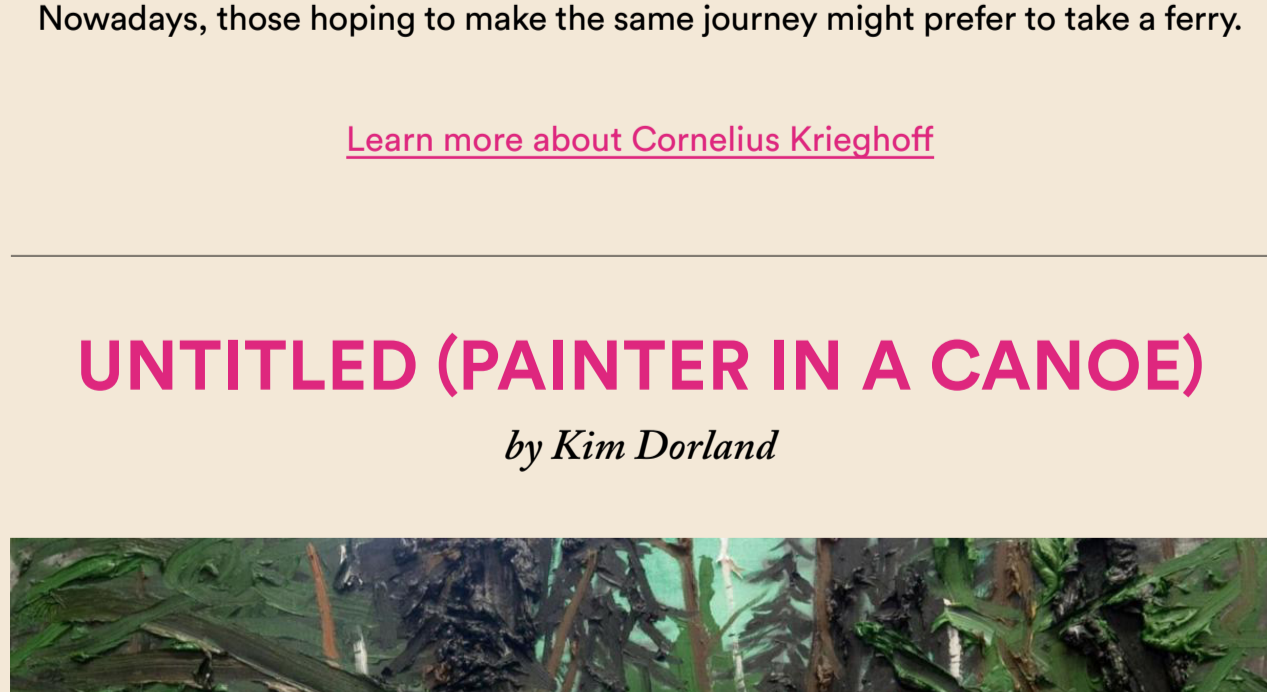
Alex Colville, *Swimming Dog and Canoe*, 1979, courtesy of Artnet.

A determined black Labrador is a nose ahead of its owners—Nova Scotia-based artist Alex Colville (1920–2013) and his wife, Rhoda—who glide along the water in a nearby canoe, calmly glancing across at their swimming dog. The hero of this scene is the canine, depicted in sharp focus in the foreground, while the humans recede into the background, their features as soft as the leafy trees on the waterline. Man, animal, human invention, and the natural environment are all in peaceful harmony in this composition, one of many by Colville that includes animals. “If it were a question of reincarnation,” the artist once **said**, “I wouldn’t mind just being a dog. Their lives seem to me to be entirely innocent.”

Read more in ACI’s [Alex Colville: Life & Work](#) by Ray Cronin

GREG HILL IN HIS CEREAL BOX CANOE, OTTAWA, ONTARIO

by *Jeff Thomas*



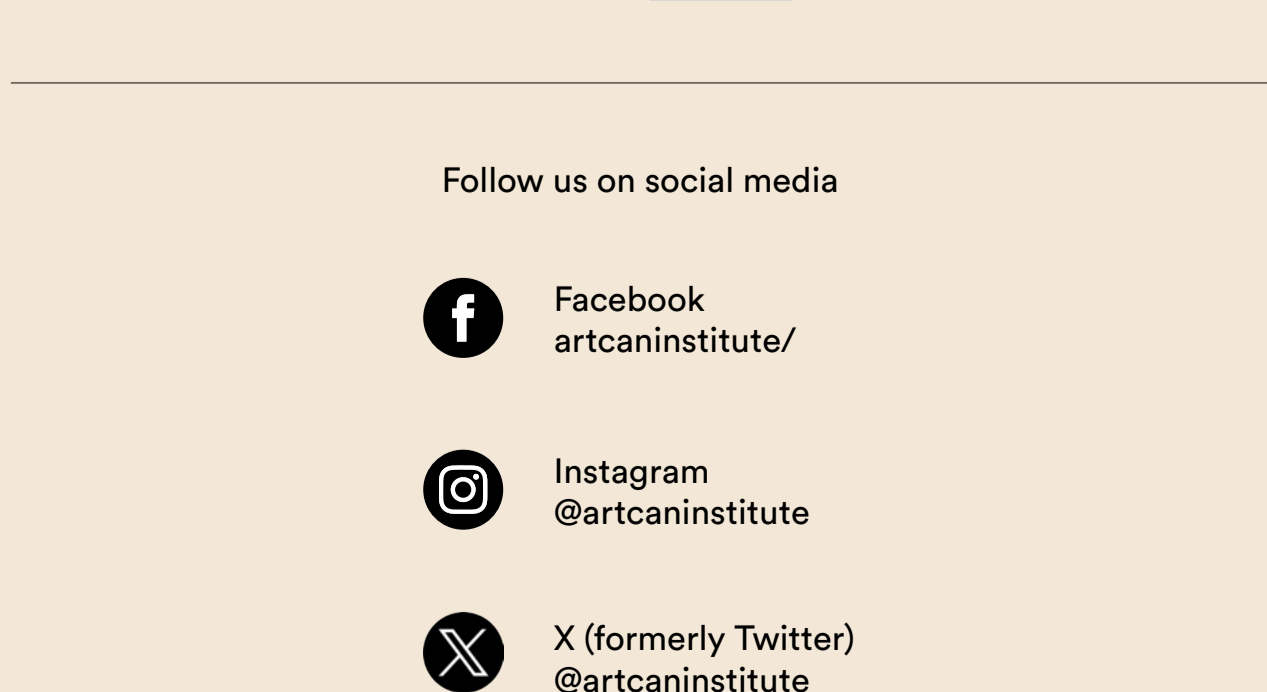
Jeff Thomas, *Greg Hill in His Cereal Box Canoe, Ottawa, Ontario*, 2000, courtesy of Jeff Thomas.

In this photograph by Iroquois artist Jeff Thomas (b.1956), Kanyen’kehà:ka (Mohawk) artist and curator Greg Hill (b.1967) poses in his canoe made of cereal boxes. The image marks the beginning of Thomas’s *Seize the Space* series, 2000–2011, in which he documented his friends interacting with the Samuel de Champlain monument in Ottawa. A bronze statue of an unnamed Anishinaabe navigator stood at the monument’s base from 1918 until an influx of complaints led to the so-called Indian Scout being moved to nearby Major’s Hill Park in 1999. The statue is shown kneeling because he was supposed to be in a canoe, but a lack of funds meant that he just looked subservient to Champlain. After Thomas took this photo, Hill portaged to the Scout’s new location and laid the canoe at his feet.

Read more in ACI’s [Ottawa Art & Artists: An Illustrated History](#) by Jim Burant

NTNC3

by *Sarah Anne Johnson*



Sarah Anne Johnson, *NTNC3*, 2020, courtesy of the artist and Yosso Milo, New York.

Two nude women paddle fearlessly through a Manitoba forest waterway, their canoe transformed by paint into an amphibian creature with menacing fangs. The feeling of fierce feminine freedom in this altered photograph by internationally recognized, Winnipeg-born artist Sarah Anne Johnson (b.1976) is further accentuated by a rainbow explosion of cloud-like blobs, which are mirrored like a Rorschach test along the vertical axis of the composition’s centre rather than following the natural horizon line of the aquatic landscape. A giddy sense of disorientation pervades this surrealist fantasy, which shatters the limitations of photography and warps traditional techniques of depicting beauty in the natural world.

[Learn more about Sarah Anne Johnson](#)

CROSSING THE ST. LAWRENCE WITH THE ROYAL MAIL AT QUEBEC

by *Cornelius Krieghoff*

Cornelius Krieghoff, *Crossing the St. Lawrence with the Royal Mail at Quebec*, 1859, courtesy of the Sobeay Art Foundation, New Glasgow.

In nineteenth-century Quebec City, delivering the mail wasn’t an easy task. Dutch-born Canadian painter Cornelius Krieghoff (1815–1872) often depicted dramatic and idyllic scenes of life in the great outdoors, with many set during winter, including this landscape showing a group hauling a sizeable Royal Mail canoe up a treacherous bank of ice. The perilous crossing of the St. Lawrence River enabled communication between Quebec City and Lévis—although, in some of the six versions Krieghoff painted of this scene, Montreal is shown on the horizon line. It was also an act of asserting British, and mankind’s, dominion over the land. Nowadays, those hoping to make the same journey might prefer to take a ferry.

[Learn more about Cornelius Krieghoff](#)

UNTITLED (PAINTER IN A CANOE)

by *Kim Dorland*

Kim Dorland, *Untitled (Painter in a Canoe)*, 2013, private collection.

When Canadian art history buffs see an image of a painter in a canoe, they likely think of Tom Thomson (1877–1917). The prolific painter, a close associate of the Group of Seven, mysteriously disappeared in Algonquin Park’s Canoe Lake, leaving only his overturned canoe behind. This thickly layered and neon-hued painting by Toronto-based Kim Dorland (b.1974) has been described as “like Tom Thomson on acid” and is inspired by the untimely death of the iconic artist. Many of Dorland’s creations are—in fact, he even named his son, Thomson, after his artistic hero. While Dorland’s paintings differ greatly in scale, palette, technique, and subject matter, the ghostly presence of his predecessor remains.

[Learn more about Kim Dorland](#)

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Image Credits: [1, 10] Kim Dorland, *Untitled (Painter in a Canoe)*, 2013, oil and acrylic on jute over wood panel, 121.9 x 152.4 cm. Private Collection. Courtesy of Kim Dorland. [2] Iijuwaa Bill Reid, *Loo Taas*, 1986, red cedar wood, paint, 1520 cm (length). Courtesy of UBC Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver. Photo credit: J. Baird. [3] Diana Thorncroft, *Group of Seven Awkward Moments (White Pine and the Group of Dwarfs)*, 2009, coloured pencil & graphite on paper, 55.9 x 75.6 cm. Courtesy of Marion Scott Gallery, Vancouver. [4] Itee Pootoogook, *Carving with an Axe*, 2006, coloured pencil & graphite on paper, 55.9 x 75.6 cm. Courtesy of Marion Scott Gallery, Vancouver. [5] Alexander Henderson, *Spring Inundation: Bank of the St. Lawrence River*, c.1865, albumen silver print, 10.7 x 19.2 cm. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase (S7139711). Courtesy of Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa. [6] Alex Colville, *Swimming Dog and Canoe*, 1979, acrylic polymer emulsion on board, 53.4 x 119.4 cm. Courtesy of Artnet. [7] Jeff Thomas, *Greg Hill in His Cereal Box Canoe, Ottawa, Ontario*, 2000. Courtesy of Jeff Thomas. © Jeff Thomas. [8] Sarah Anne Johnson, *NTNC3*, 2020, pigment print with acrylic paint, 101.5 x 152.5 cm. © Sarah Anne Johnson. Courtesy of the artist and Yosso Milo Gallery, New York. [9] Cornelius Krieghoff, *Crossing the St. Lawrence with the Royal Mail at Quebec*, 1859, oil on canvas, 43.2 x 61 cm. Courtesy of the Sobeay Art Foundation, New Glasgow.