

ALEXANDER HENDERSON ART AND NATURE



Alexander Henderson, *Cape Trinity, Saguenay River, Quebec*, about 1868.
Gift of E. Dorothy Benson, MP-1968.31.1.124, McCord Museum

Press Release

Photography exhibition *Alexander Henderson – Art and Nature*

A contemplative journey to the heart of majestic Quebec and Canadian landscapes

Montreal, June 7, 2022 – From June 10, 2022, to April 16, 2023, the McCord Museum is presenting *Alexander Henderson – Art and Nature*, the first major exhibition devoted to Alexander Henderson (1831-1913). Visitors are invited to marvel at the vast natural spaces and fascinating urban scenes of the 19th century the photographer captured over the course of his career, from his early excursions into the area surrounding Montreal, to his trips to the furthest reaches of Quebec and travels to Western Canada. Though his work was later forgotten for many years, Henderson became one of the country’s leading landscape photographers, creating images reminiscent of the picturesque compositions of the great masters.

Alexander Henderson – Art and Nature features over 250 period prints and reproductions of photographs, in addition to documents and photo albums from the photographer’s personal archives. The public will discover striking, Romanticism-infused images taken during his many travels: canoeing on Laurentian rivers, Indigenous fishing camps on the Restigouche River, and the majestic Saguenay fjord. Though known for his photographs of the great outdoors, Henderson also took numerous photos of city scenes depicting the Montreal of the past—views of Mount Royal, ships docked in the harbour and downtown flooding.

“Henderson is a profoundly Romantic artist. His work conveys the emotions he felt faced with the beauty of nature—the metaphysical awe it inspired. His attention to detail and the sensuality of the environment, whether rural or urban, distinguished him from other photographers of the era, such as Notman, who focussed more on commercial expectations,” noted H el ene Samson, the exhibition’s curator and outgoing Curator of Photography, McCord Museum.

Henderson demonstrates a real affection for Canada’s winters, which seem to have provided him with much inspiration while also requiring him to adapt to the challenges of taking photographs in snowy and frigid conditions. His winter scenes—the aftermath of a snowstorm, tobogganing at Montmorency Falls, ice shoves on the Saint Lawrence, and especially the marvellous images of frost and ice captured at Niagara Falls—possess a splendour that sets him apart from his

contemporaries. In addition, the photographer's correspondence, quoted throughout the exhibition, immerses visitors in the land and the lifestyle of the time. As he wrote from Montreal to John Elder on June 7, 1856, "Three friends and myself were away this week, two days, on a fishing expedition to the Chateauguay Lakes, but bad weather and rather poor sport – the scenery is beautiful like some of our highland lakes only the hills covered with forest to their tops – the land is poor and out of the way up there, so that it is a perfect wilderness."

A Scotsman in Canada

A scion of the Scottish landed gentry, Alexander Henderson immigrated to Montreal in 1855. The grandson of the first chairman of the National Bank of Scotland and the son of a prosperous merchant, he was independently wealthy and became part of Canadian society's privileged class upon his arrival. This financial security enabled him to pursue his new passion of photography.

Henderson had been acquainted with photography in Scotland, but it was in Montreal, around 1857, that he learned the technique, very likely from William Notman (1826-1891). The two men, who shared an interest in the arts, were among the small group of influential figures who attended a meeting in 1860 that would result in the creation of the Art Association of Montreal (now the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts).

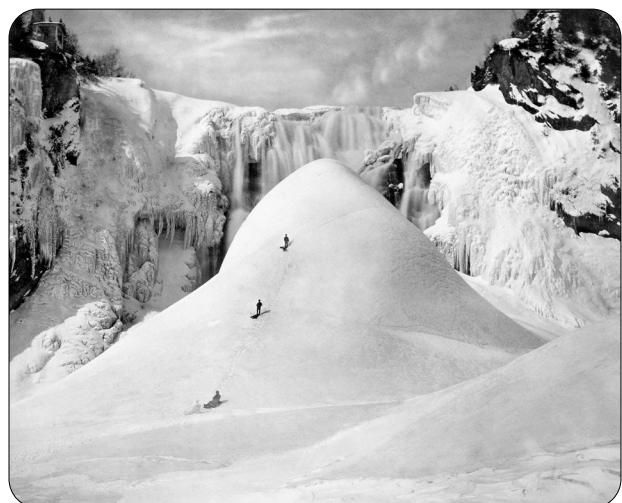
Henderson's prolific period from 1859 to 1865 saw the emergence of a genuine artistic vision as he strived to create images that rivalled the paintings and photographs he must have seen in his family home and at London's Great Exhibition of 1851. Eager to have his work recognized, Henderson submitted exceptional photographs to competitions in several international exhibitions, including those held in New York in 1877 and 1878, where he earned two first prizes in the landscape category.

He ran a photography studio on Phillips Square from 1866 to 1874, where he took portraits of a clientele composed largely of fellow European immigrants before becoming exclusively a "landscape photographer."

In the latter part of his career, he photographed major national projects for railway companies. It was during this period that he travelled to Western Canada, where he captured the majestic views of the Rockies that are also part of the exhibition.



Alexander Henderson, *Skating Rink, Montreal Harbour*, about 1870.
MP-1968.31.1.64, McCord Museum



Alexander Henderson, *Ice Cone, Montmorency Falls, Quebec*, 1876.
MP-0000.299.1, McCord Museum

Colonization and cultural bias

The exhibition also examines the colonial vision evident in Henderson's work. After all, his privileged position as a British immigrant in the Canadian society of the time helped shape his observations of both places and people. Some eloquent examples of this are his keen interest in historical buildings and traditional occupations, his photographs of major national projects for railway companies, and his disregard of certain subjects, such as French Canadians.

Although there is no indication that Henderson wished to understand the Indigenous people he so frequently photographed, he did represent their realities without artifice, unlike his contemporaries who would romanticize them to satisfy the interests of their bourgeois clientele. Despite the distance that he maintained, Henderson may have felt a certain admiration and curiosity for his Indigenous subjects. Above all else, however, there was a sense of urgency to document and preserve some traces of the lives of these communities. After all, the colonists believed that the Indigenous peoples' failure to adopt the European lifestyle would lead to their extinction.

"This exhibition is an opportunity to approach the work of a 19th-century artist from a contemporary perspective. As part of the Museum's decolonization process, we want to raise awareness of cultural bias and thereby use the Museum's collections to take a critical, clearheaded look at history," explained Suzanne Sauvage, President and Chief Executive Officer of the McCord Museum.

From recognition to anonymity

Despite enjoying a prolific career as a photographer for several decades, Alexander Henderson completely abandoned the medium in his later years and his obituary made no mention of his practice as a photographer. This omission continues to mystify Henderson experts to this day. The McCord Museum is pleased to offer lovers of history and photography access to this exceptional record of the history of Montreal and Canada. The Museum's collection of photographs by Alexander Henderson, the largest in existence, consists of nearly 2,000 period prints, complemented by his personal archives. It is especially precious since virtually all of the photographer's glass negatives—the raw material of his practice—were destroyed. Only twenty or so remain, preserved at the McCord Museum and the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec. It is believed that the surviving prints represent only a fraction of his total output.



Alexander Henderson, *Spring Inundation near Montreal*, 1865. MP-0000.308.5, McCord Museum

Alexander Henderson: the book

Alexander Henderson – Art and Nature, now on sale at the Museum Boutique, is the first book devoted to the photographer. More than 170 faithful reproductions of period prints take readers on a journey through the seasons, from Montreal to remote regions of Quebec and Western Canada during the second half of the 19th century. The book includes a biography of the artist by former curator Stanley G. Triggs, who was responsible for the last-minute rescue of Henderson's photographic collection, and an essay by H  l  ne Samson, outgoing Curator of Photography at the McCord Museum, who examines the influence of British colonial rule on the style and subjects of the artist's photographs. This publication will appeal to collectors and historians of Canadian photography, along with nature and landscape enthusiasts.

Credit

An exhibition organized by the McCord Museum.

Curator: H  l  ne Samson, outgoing Curator, Photography, McCord Museum

Researcher: Nathalie Houle, Curatorial Assistant, Photography, McCord Museum

Project manager: Fran  ois Vall  e, McCord Museum

Exhibition design: MASSIVart

Graphics: Protocol Studio

This project was made possible in part through Library and Archives Canada's Documentary Heritage Communities Program.

Exhibition-related activities

Several free cultural activities are being organized this fall for visitors and photography fans, both in person and online, including the following:

Round table *Creating a national image – A look back at the history of Canadian landscape photography*

Wednesday, September 28, 6:00 to 7:00 pm, at the Museum

During this round table discussion of Canadian landscape photography from the 19th century to the present day, the public will be invited to question visual representations of landscapes as an artistic practice, as well as how they relate to the politics of creating a national image. Moderated by Zo  e Tousignant, Curator, Photography, McCord Museum.

Participants:

- Karla McManus, art historian and visual theorist
- Elizabeth Anne Cavaliere, SSHRC post-doctoral researcher, Queen's University
- Jessica Auer, Canadian filmmaker, photographer and educator

Free activity, in English, followed by a question period in French and English.

Journées de la culture *Photography workshop: Landscapes* **Saturday, October 1, 1:30 to 3:45 pm, at the Museum**

The McCord Museum invites photography lovers to learn basic landscape photography techniques as part of an urban landscape photography workshop conducted in the area surrounding the McCord Museum, under the supervision of a photography expert.

Free activity, in French. Activity presented in collaboration with the Marsan School of Professional Photography, as part of the Journées de la culture.

Photobook Club: *Landscape and politics* **Wednesday, October 12, 6:00 to 8:00 pm, at the Museum**

Artists and photography enthusiasts are invited to talk about landscape photography books and reflect on the representation, exploitation and appropriation of land in the photography books and artistic practices of yesterday and today. An initiative of Jean-François Hamelin, Josée Schryer and Thomas Bouquin.

*Free activity, in French and English.
Activity presented in collaboration with the Photobook Club Montréal*

Museum hours and fees

Mondays (June 26 to September 5, 2022), Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays, 10 am to 6 pm
Wednesdays, 10 am to 9 pm | Saturdays and Sundays, 10 am to 5 pm

The Museum is also open on holiday Mondays, from 10 am to 6 pm (12 noon to 6 pm on December 26, 2022, and January 2, 2023).

Adults: \$19 | Seniors: \$17 | Students (ages 18 to 30): \$14 | 17 and under: free
Indigenous people: free

Wednesday evenings: free (*Piqutiapiit* and permanent exhibition) or \$9.50 (*JJ Levine: Queer Photographs* and *Alexander Henderson: Art and Nature*)

First Sunday of the month: free for Quebec residents

To ensure an optimal visitor experience for all, you must reserve online tickets for Museum visits and activities. Visit the Admission Desk page on the Museum's [Website](#).

The McCord Museum sincerely thanks BMO Financial Group for free admission on Wednesday evenings, the Fondation J. A. DeSève for free admission for children 12 and under, and the Rossy Foundation for free admission for teens ages 13 to 17 for the year 2022.

Covid-19: measures for a safe visit

The Museum observes the health measures recommended by the Quebec government. To find out what measures are in effect at the time of your visit, visit the Museum's [Website](#).

McCord Museum: Museum of photography

The McCord Museum's [photography collection](#) encompasses over 2.15 million photographs that primarily document the social history of Montreal, but also that of Quebec and Canada. Ranging from a series of daguerreotypes created in the 1840s-1850s to contemporary digital images, the collection illustrates the development of the art of photography along with the great transformations that have marked the city over the last two centuries. The Notman Photographic Archives constitute the core of the collection with some 450,000 photographs from the Montreal studio founded by William Notman (1826-1891) in 1856 and run by his sons until 1935 under the name Wm. Notman & Son. In the fall of 2019, the Notman archives were listed in the prestigious Canada Memory of the World Register of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

About the McCord Museum

The McCord Museum celebrates life in Montreal, its people and its communities, past and present. Reaching beyond the city to the wider world, the Museum creates and presents engaging exhibitions, educational programming and cultural activities with a critical and inclusive take on social history. Its collections of Archives, Documentary Art, Dress, Fashion and Textiles, Indigenous Cultures, Material Culture and Photography comprise 200,000 objects and works of art, 2.15 million photographs, 3,500 rare books and 340 linear metres of textual archives. Founded on October 13, 1921, the Museum is celebrating its 100th anniversary with special programming until fall 2022. McCord Museum: Our People, Our Stories.

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[Click here to download high-resolution images](#)

Source: McCord Museum

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