



PRESS RELEASE — FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Seeing “The Last Spike” in a New Light McCord Museum re-examines the power of an iconic Canadian photograph

Montréal, Tuesday, August 3, 2005 — This summer and fall at the McCord Museum, a Canadian icon goes under the microscope. Until October 30, 2005 and in conjunction with Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2005, the exhibition *Primal Images — Transmutations of a National Icon* explores the long life and many guises of a famous Canadian photograph.

A new nation captured with the click of a shutter

On November 7, 1885, a small ceremony accompanied the driving of the last spike in the Canadian Pacific Railway, thus connecting Canada from sea to sea. More than a simple formality, the hammering of this last peg heralded the founding myth of national unity — a cornerstone of the nation building that has been the rallying cry of Canada’s political and economic leadership since the nineteenth century.

Alexander Ross’s famous photograph of this ceremony — and the “primal image” of this exhibition — is now widely recognized as one of Canada’s founding symbols, and has inspired an impressive array of commemorative representations. *Primal Images* places the Ross photograph at the epicentre of 50 such symbolic derivatives drawn from the collections of the McCord Museum of Canadian History, the Canadian Pacific Railway Archives, the National Archives of Canada, and the Canadian Museum of Science and Technology.

See the last spike and the iconography it inspired

Curator Vincent Lavoie, formerly of the McCord and presently professor of art history at the Université du Québec à Montréal, shows how this apparently straightforward historical record grew into a landmark of collective memory. The exhibition includes dozens of reproductions, copies and caricatures of the celebrated image, alternate takes of the initial ceremony and staged retakes from later years, various examples of last spike memorabilia, and a fragment of the final rail. Most notable is the preserved and partly mutilated last spike itself, along with commemorative jewellery made from its remnants.

Primal Images — Transmutations of a National Icon is on view at the McCord Museum in Montréal until October 30, 2005, in conjunction with Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2005. It appeared previously at the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris, where it accompanied Le Mois de la Photo à Paris 2004. A

bilingual catalogue is available at the McCord Boutique or through ABC Art Books Canada (paper; ISBN 1-896940-35-8, \$30.00). *Primal Images* was produced by the Canadian Cultural Centre and the Canadian Embassy in Paris, in collaboration with the McCord Museum.

The McCord is open from Tuesday to Friday from 10 am to 6 pm, and on weekends, and Mondays during the summer months from 10 am to 5 pm. Admission (including taxes) is \$10 for adults, \$7.50 for seniors, \$5.50 for students, \$3 for children between the ages of 6 and 12, and \$20 for families. Museum admission is available free of charge to members, children aged 5 and under, and to all on the first Saturday of each month from 10 am to 12 pm.

Related event:

Curator's talk with Vincent Lavoie (in French)
Wednesday, September 14, 2005 at 5:30 pm
Reception to follow

*This event is held in conjunction with **Le Mois de la Photo à Montréal 2005***

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