



A man, multiple facets

William Notman (1826–1891) was Canada’s first internationally known photographer and artist. The success of his business and the remarkable longevity of his Montréal studio — in operation from 1856 to 1935 — place him apart from other Canadian photographers and rank him among the greatest of his era. The quality brand name of Wm. Notman & Son is associated with hundreds of thousands of fascinating portraits and landscapes that illustrate the birth of a new North American nation. The immense historical value of this collection, produced by William Notman and a number of other photographers under his direction, is still being revealed.

Notman owed his early fame to portraits in snowy settings typical of Canadian winters, which were actually mounted entirely in the studio. He also became known for impressive landscapes documenting the colonization of a vast land made newly accessible by the construction of the transcontinental railway.

This thematic exhibition, the first retrospective devoted to William Notman’s work, focuses on different facets of this enterprising man’s personality. An intrepid businessman, an inveterate networker, an artist and a pioneer, Notman formulated a vision of photography and developed techniques that anticipated the way the art would be practised during the 20th century and, later, in the digital era.

An intrepid businessman

Less than four months after he arrived in Montréal in August 1856, William Notman set up as a professional photographer. The invention of the daguerreotype had been announced in France in 1839, and the calotype was patented in England shortly afterwards, in 1841. By the 1850s, photography was beginning to be employed on a wide scale. With the introduction of the glass negative, it became possible to make multiple prints of the same image, increasing the medium’s commercial possibilities. This marvellous new technology was promoted at the world’s fairs held in London (1851) and Paris (1855), and would continue to be a focus of local industrial exhibitions. Large portrait studios, like the ones run by Mathew Brady in New York (1844 until about

1865) and by Eugène Disdéri in Paris (1853 until about 1875), were proving successful. But photography was still evolving, and the market was precarious. The decision to take it up professionally showed proof of initiative, resourcefulness and a good deal of confidence. In Montréal, the dauntless William Notman had found a city in tune with his aspirations and his dynamism, for during the 1860s the metropolis was in a period of major demographic and economic expansion. Notman was in the right place at the right time.

An inveterate networker

Notman paid close attention to his new surroundings, identifying, observing and quickly assimilating the models of Montréal's colonial Victorian society. Good-natured and unassuming, he made friends easily and was adept at seizing opportunities to advance his business. It was through social connections that Notman obtained the contract to photograph the final stages of construction of the Victoria Bridge (1858–1859). The linking of his name to this extraordinary engineering project launched his career. Following the official opening of the bridge by Albert Edward, Prince of Wales, the phrase "Photographer to the Queen" appeared regularly in the firm's promotional material. It was also inscribed over the entrance to the studio at 7–9 Rue de Bleury. A superb networker, Notman encouraged encounters between prominent people who made their way to this address, and the studio became a hub where he could simultaneously expand his activities and enhance his reputation.

An artist

We know from documents in the Notman family archives that William studied art in his youth. Following the move to Montréal, he described himself in advertisements as an "artist," since in his view photography was an art on a par with painting, and subject to similar rules. He stated his position clearly in an article published in the 1870 edition of *Photographic Mosaics: An Annual Record of Photographic Progress*. A photograph, he wrote, is first and foremost an aesthetic object. It was not a widely held view at the time, as the automatic nature of photography was thought to run counter to the creativity inherent to a work of art. A prevailing romantic conception of art also saw creation and commerce as incompatible. It was not until the 20th century that the artistic value of photography began to be generally acknowledged.

The first meeting of the Art Association of Montréal, forerunner of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, was held in William Notman's studio on January 11, 1860. The aim of the founders, a small group of leading citizens and artists that included Notman, was to encourage the development of fine arts in the city, and to educate the population by presenting exhibitions of paintings, prints and photographs. The Notman premises included an art gallery, and a number of Art Association exhibitions were held there. The studio also boasted an art

department, where painters and decorators busied themselves painting backdrops for portrait settings, hand-colouring prints and, most notably, executing the celebrated composite tableaux — creatively conceived collages made up of many individual photographs — that earned Notman international fame.

A pioneer

Notman established the largest network of photography studios in 19th century North America. Based in Montréal, his business empire spanned Canada from Halifax to Toronto, and spread down the east coast of the United States into the state of New York. Over 450,000 photographs have come from the Montréal studio alone. In remarkable condition and extremely well documented, these images, which consist largely of portraits but also include extraordinary views of Canada's territory, inestimably enrich our collective memory.

Owing to his modern approach to business, Notman ensured not only the survival of his photographs but also their optimal circulation. Published in illustrated books, assembled in portfolios and produced as stereographs, his images reached and edified a wide public. And it was Notman himself who assumed responsibility for the dissemination of this unique œuvre, combining artistic sensibility and pragmatism to further his deeply held views about what photography ought to be.