

# Daredevils of Niagara Falls

The Spectacle of Triumph and Tragedy

May 22 - October 19, 2024



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CASTELLANI  
ART MUSEUM  
OF NIAGARA UNIVERSITY

## At the Mercy of Nature

Imagine. You're crammed into a wooden barrel with just enough space for you and the padding. The lid is sealed tight. Set adrift, the mighty Niagara River's current grabs you. Deprived of sight, you're swept towards the Falls. Your excited exhalation makes the air hot and stagnant. Water rages violently around you. Just as you reach the edge of the Falls and pitch over, your stomach drops.

Adrenaline surges. You hold your breath. The roar of the plunging water fills your ears. Disoriented, you're spinning and tossing. The sonic waves pound your eardrums. Dropping almost 200 feet, you're at the mercy of the brute force of nature. You hit the water with a mind-numbing impact—shocking your system.

The water pressure pounds your ear drums. Cold water forces itself through tiny cracks. As you surface, you instinctively take a deep breath. The air is still hot and foul. With heart pounding, you wait for the sound of the rescue team to open the hatch...



**fu·nam·bu·list** /fyō'nambyələst/  
(noun) A tightrope walker.

## A Visual and Historical Experience

*Daredevils of Niagara Falls: The Spectacle of Triumph and Tragedy* juxtaposes works from CAM's renowned Charles Rand Penney Historical Niagara Falls Print Collection, acquired in 2006, with artifacts formerly exhibited at the Niagara Falls Museum in the Daredevil Hall of Fame Collection. The artworks deliver both artistic interpretations and factual depictions of spectacles at the Falls.

The Niagara Falls Museum (1827–1999) and Daredevil Hall of Fame within it were first established on the Ontario, Canada side of Niagara Falls in 1827. It moved to Niagara Falls, New York from 1888 to 1958 before returning to Ontario where it stayed for over 40 years until 1999. The Museum was dedicated to showcasing the history and stories of daredevils at Niagara Falls.

The historical objects formerly exhibited in the Daredevil Hall of Fame, rely largely on unverified documentation relating to their authenticity. Despite the uncertainty surrounding some of these artifacts' provenance, their tangible qualities convey the essence of daring feats and tragic events. Together, the exhibition's artifacts, paintings, and works on paper provide multidimensional perspectives on Niagara Falls' legacy of adventures.



**Image Credits: (cover)** (details) Artist Unknown, *Portrait of The Great Farini* (William Leonard Hunt), 1860, photograph in a Victorian frame; H. Meyer, *La Chute Du Niagara, dans le Pays de l'Or* (Niagara Falls, in the Land of Gold), 1892, color halftone; Maker Unknown, *Section of Manila Hemp Rope* attributed to Blondin, n.d., Abacá hemp (mounted on wood); **(above clockwise from top left)** (detail) Artist Unknown, untitled (Sam Patch Montage), n.d., commercial reproduction; Bernhard Gillam, *The shaky situation of the Political Blondin*, 1885, color lithograph; Artist Unknown, untitled (Annie Edson Taylor with barrel), n.d., photographic reproduction; John Symes, *Maid of the Mist II*, 1861, oil on canvas; Artist Unknown, *Signora Maria Spelterini in her High Rope Performance*, circa 1880, lithograph.

## By Barrel, Boat, Tightrope, Airplane, or Parachute

According to multiple sources, since 1850 more than 3,000 people have gone over Niagara Falls, either as intentional stunts, or through suicide attempts or accidental plunges in the river. Those choosing to navigate Niagara Falls were motivated by the lure of fame and perhaps fortune. They did so using a variety of methods: sealed container, tight rope, diving, swimming, boating, parachuting, and flying a plane near the waters. Still others completed equally daring feats by saving the lives of those in the swirling waters. The only instances of people surviving an actual plunge over the falls occurred at the Canadian Horseshoe Falls, while American Niagara Falls claimed the lives of anyone attempting to pass over.

The first recorded person to survive going over the falls was school teacher Annie Edson Taylor in 1901 in a wooden barrel. Dozens of other thrill seekers followed her. After the death of daredevil William "Red" Hill, Jr. in 1951, stunting at Niagara Falls became illegal and is subject to fines of up to \$25,000. It was not until 2012, when famed Nik Wallenda, "The King of the High Wire," was given permission by both United States and Canadian officials to walk the tightrope over the mighty Niagara Falls. Wallenda—an experienced funambulist (tightrope walker)—was successful in this venture, which was witnessed by thousands.

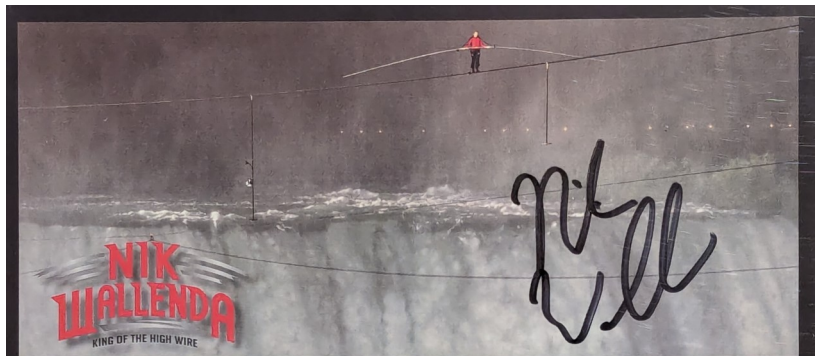
Purportedly, the last daredevil to intentionally go over the Falls was Kirk Jones. When Jones took his first trip over the Falls, on October 20, 2003, he did so without a barrel or any protection devices, reportedly with, "only the clothes on his back." Upon his second try on April 19, 2017, he lost his life in the attempt. Through all these ventures, Niagara Falls remains a place of both triumph and tragedy, of humans challenging nature.

## Challenging Boundaries

The sight of daredevils, whether plunging over, tightrope walking across, or leaping into, Niagara Falls provoked visceral sensations of awe and horror in viewers. In a museum context, this exhibition presents these dramatic stunts as early site-specific performance art. Through documentation of their exploits, Niagara Falls daredevils created boundary-pushing environmental art and mass multimedia engagements.

While their primary goals were seeking fame (and often, fortune), Niagara Falls daredevils chased intangible ambitions as much as any commercial rewards. They created interactive art with their very bodies, underscoring humankind's tenuous mortality against nature's sublime power. Anchored on the waterfall's visual grandeur, their performances explored the perilous line between life and death.

**Michael J. Beam**  
Curator of Exhibitions and Special Projects



**Image Credits: (clockwise from top)** Artist Unknown, *Signor Guillermo Antonio Farini*, 1860, photographic reproduction; (detail) Artist Unknown, untitled (photograph of Jean Lussier and His Rubber Ball), circa 1950, photograph; Artist Unknown, *Nik Wallenda King of the High Wire* (autographed by Nik Wallenda), 2012, color reproduction; Unknown Artist, graphic reproduction of a photograph of The Niagara Falls Museum and Daredevil Hall of Fame, n.d., commercial reproduction.

## Exhibited Artworks

(•) Indicates Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University Collection. Generous donation from Dr. Charles Rand Penney, partially funded by the Castellani Purchase Fund, with additional funding from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas A. Lytle, 2006.

(‡) Indicates formerly exhibited at The Niagara Falls Museum, Daredevil Hall of Fame Collection, Courtesy of Jacob Sherman.

**George H. Andrews** (American, 1821–1885) *The Death of Captain Webb: The Whirlpool in the Lower Rapids, Niagara* from *The Illustrated London News*, 1883, wood engraving, 16 x 21 in. (•)

### Artist(s) Unknown

Untitled (black and white collaged photograph of Martha Wagenfuhrer), n.d., commercial reproduction, 20 1/2 x 26 1/4 in. (‡)

*The Death of Captain Webb* from *The Graphic*, August 4, 1883, 1883, lithograph, 16 x 11 3/4 in. (•)

*Horse-Shoe Fall, Niagara*, circa 1844–45, lithograph, 12 x 16 1/2 in. (•)

*Monsieur Blondin Crossing Niagara on a Rope, Dressed as an Ape, July 14, 1859*, 1859, wood engraving, 15 7/8 x 11 in. (•)

Niagara Falls Museum window display, *Bobby Leach – Over the Falls July 25, 1911*, n.d., photograph, 8 x 10 in. (‡)

*Nik Wallenda King of the High Wire* (autographed by Nik Wallenda), 2012 color reproduction, 8 1/2 x 11 in. Gift of Nik Wallenda: 2013

*Portrait of The Great Farini* (William Leonard Hunt), 1860, photograph in Victorian frame, 11 x 10 1/2 x 2 in. (‡)

*Signor Guillermo Antonio Farini*, 1860, photographic reproductions, 29 x 25 in. (‡)

Untitled (Anne Edson Taylor after her trip over the Falls, October 24, 1901), n.d., photographic reproduction, 12 x 10 1/2 in. (‡)

Untitled (Anne Edson Taylor with Barrel), n.d., photographic reproduction, 26 1/2 x 20 1/2 in. (‡)

Untitled (Bobby Leach and his Barrel after his Perilous Trip over Niagara Falls, July 25, 1911), 1911, photographic collage, 17 x 13 in. (‡)

Untitled (Jean Lussier), n.d., large-format black and white photograph, 63 x 48 in. (‡)

Untitled (Jean Lussier Promotional Handbill), n.d., commercial reproduction with Jean Lussier autograph, 13 x 11 in. (‡)

Untitled (Meerschaum Pipe), n.d., Meerschaum clay, 8 x 4 x 2 in. (‡)

Untitled (Promotional Transparencies), n.d., mylar, 11 x 8 1/2 in. (each) (‡)

Untitled (Sam Patch Montage), n.d., commercial reproductions, 30 x 30 in. (‡)

*William “Red” Hill, Jr.-1st Trip through Rapids, July 8, 1945*, 1945, photograph, 12 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. (‡)

**CEPA Five Photographers Exhibition Invitation**, 1975, commercial print, 7 7/8 x 5 1/2 in. Courtesy of Alan Bigelow and Elizabeth Licata

**Chisholm Bros.**, Portland, Maine, *Niagara Falls, NY, Octavo Souvenir Booklet*, circa 1880, lithograph after photograph, 5 1/4 x 64 in. (•)

**William Fisher Cooper**, Martha Wagenfuhrer Daredevil Barrel (reproduction), circa 1901, wood, iron, 50 x 29 x 29 in. (‡)

**Bernhard Gillam** (British, 1858–1896) *The shaky situation of the Political Blondin*, 1885, color lithograph, 14 1/8 x 10 1/2 in. (•)

**William “Red” Hill, Sr.** (Canadian, 1888–1942), *The Red Hill Life Saving Grappler*, n.d., wood, metal, canvas, rope, stainless steel hooks, 17 x 46 1/2 x 8 in. (‡)

**Polly King** (American, 1900–1993) untitled (artwork for The Niagara Falls Museum promotional brochure), n.d., watercolor and pencil, on paper, 23 x 15 in. (‡)

**Donald E. Loker**, *Blondin’s Gorge Exploits Thrilling to Millions*, n.d., commercial newspaper article, 19 x 13 in. (‡)

**Jean Lussier** (Canadian/American, 1891–1971), collection of photographs, diagrams, and sketches, circa 1950, various media, 29 1/4 x 51 in. (‡)

Maker Unknown, *Section of Manila Hemp Rope attributed to Blondin*, n.d., Abacá hemp (on wood display), 4 x 16 x 2 1/2 in. (‡)

Maker Unknown, untitled (Bobby Leach Steel barrel (Plug)), n.d., steel, wood, 98 x 29 x 29 in. (‡)

Manufacturer Unknown, Akron, Ohio, untitled (Jean Lussier Rubber Ball) (collapsed), circa 1928, natural rubber, canvas, steel, 36 x 58 x 60 in. (‡)

**H. Meyer**, *La Chute Du Niagara, dans le Pays de l’Or* (Niagara Falls, in the Land of Gold), 1892, color halftone, 23 x 17 3/4 in. (•)

**Thomas Nast** (American, b. Germany, 1840–1902) *A View of Niagara as it may be a few years hence*, 1883, wood engraving, 15 7/8 x 10 3/4 in. (•)

**Harry McEwen Petitt** (American, 1867–1941) *Our Famous Niagara Falls as it may appear shortly...*, 1906, relief halftone, 16 1/8 x 11 1/4 in. (•)

**Primus** “Over the Falls” (Official Music Video) Interscope Records and Prawn Song Records (1997)

**J. S. Pughe** (Welsh, 1870–1909), *Save Niagara Falls–From This*, 1906, chromo-lithograph, 20 1/8 x 13 3/8 in. (•)

**Sage Sons & Company**, Buffalo, New York *Niagara Falls & Blondin–A Guide and Souvenir*, 1866, commercial publication with pocket envelope, 5 3/4 x 4 in. (‡)

**Arnold Sherman and Stanley Epstein**, *Souvenir Photo Display*, circa 1960, wood, metal, fiberglass, barrel, paint, 80 x 94 x 96 in. (‡)

**Souvenir Photos LTD**, Canada, untitled, (souvenir photograph), n.d., commercial printing (display mount) and unique Polaroid photograph, 6 x 4 3/4 in. (‡)

**John Symes** (American, 1817–1888), *Maid of the Mist II*, 1861, oil on canvas, 20 1/4 x 30 1/2 in. Gift of Peter Barton Hutt, 2023

**Weil, Levy & King, Inc.**, Buffalo, New York, Niagara Falls Museum promotional brochure, n.d., commercial printing, 18 x 11 3/4 in. (‡)

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to our exhibition lenders Jacob Sherman, The Niagara Falls Museum/Daredevil Hall of Fame Collection, and Alan Bigelow and Elizabeth Licata. Gratitude goes to Ellen Carey and Cindy Sherman for their correspondence regarding the context for the 1975 exhibition invitation photograph for *Five Photographers*. We recognize Peter Barton Hutt for his gift of J. Symes’ *Maid of the Mist II* (1861) to CAM’s collection.

Appreciation also goes to Kevin Leary, Kelly Buckley, Gus Posey, and Dana Tyrrell at the Niagara Arts and Cultural Center for their assistance accessing artifacts; Doug Ward and Raymond/Hooper Handling; and Jim Sweet, Keith Sargent, and NU Facilities staff for transportation assistance. Finally, we thank Daredevil Records for partnership on related programs.

This exhibition was curated by Michael J. Beam and produced by the Castellani Art Museum of Niagara University. For more information, please visit [castellaniartmuseum.org](http://castellaniartmuseum.org).

*Daredevils of Niagara Falls: The Spectacle of Triumph and Tragedy* is made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.



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