

## **James Hart Dyke**

### **MONT BLANC: The Summit Paintings**

Exhibition catalogue available from 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023.

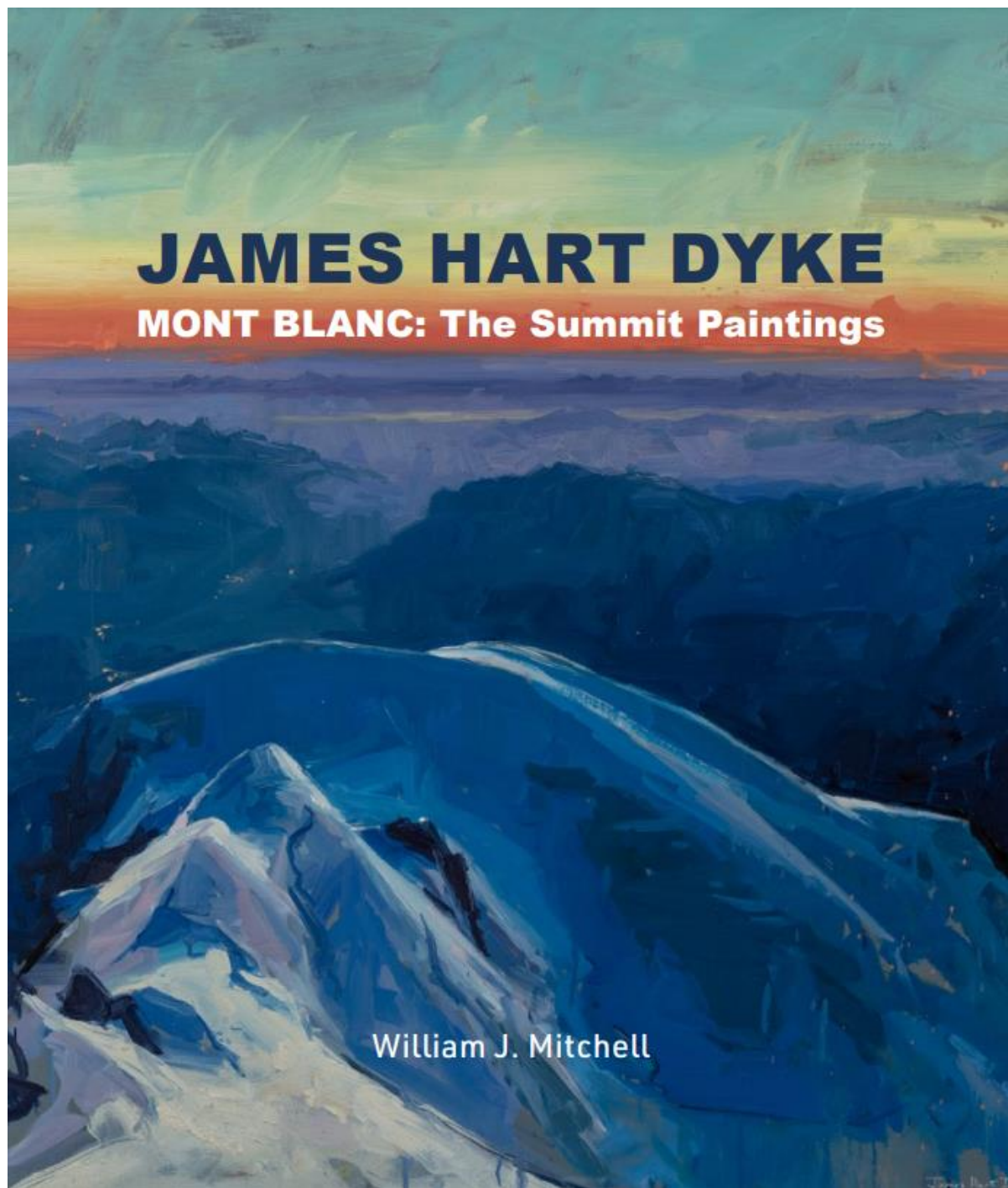
£30 + postage

Catalogues can be pre-ordered from [www.johnmitchell.net](http://www.johnmitchell.net). Pre-orders will be dispatched 1<sup>st</sup> class on 19<sup>th</sup> September.

Catalogues will also be available to purchase directly from the exhibition.

The catalogue only illustrates a selection of the total paintings in the exhibition. To view all paintings go to [www.johnmitchell.net](http://www.johnmitchell.net) from 27<sup>th</sup> September. All paintings are for sale.

The following are some sample pages.



First published in 2023.

Written by William Mitchell

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ISBN 978-1-9996521-1-1

Designed and produced by Steve Hayes  
Printed by Park Communications, London

Photography:  
Expedition photographs by Pascal Tournaire  
James Hart Dyke paintings by Richard Ivey

## FOREWORD

*MONT BLANC: The Summit Paintings* is an exhibition of paintings and sketches made whilst climbing Mont Blanc last summer. This book will serve as the exhibition catalogue and, at the same time, give an illustrated and meaningful account of a remarkable expedition, a feat of painting which took three years to plan and prepare for.

In July 2022, James Hart Dyke and I climbed Mont Blanc via its rarely used north face to paint from the summit at sunset. As one of the pre-eminent mountain painters of his generation, James was accompanied by a retinue of guides, a cameraman and climbers as he ascended the Grands Mulets Route. This is a variation of the original one, *l'ancien passage*, taken by Jacques Balmat and Dr. Michel Paccard in 1786 on the historic first ascent of Mont Blanc but today it is largely abandoned due to climate change.

Under the watchful eye of the lead guide, Christophe Profit, one of France's most revered mountaineers,

James's objective was to re-enact and emulate as closely as possible the conditions under which the French painter of the Alps, Gabriel Loppé (1825-1913) made a pair of remarkable summit paintings at sunset in the summer of 1873. I have specialised in Loppé's paintings for over twenty years and in 2018 I wrote and published the first book in English about the painter.

Early in the morning on the 6th of August 1873 Gabriel Loppé and the distinguished writer and mountaineer Leslie Stephen (1832-1904) left Chamonix intent on climbing Mont Blanc in order to witness the setting sun from the summit. Accompanied by their guides, they arrived at the summit about an hour before sunset. In 1894, twenty-one years later, in one of the best known and loved books about the Alps, *The Playground of Europe*, Leslie Stephen wrote a riveting and detailed account of the experience entitled *Sunset on Mont Blanc* and, in his own words, considered it 'the best thing that I ever wrote.'



James Hart Dyke and Christophe Profit



Gabriel Loppé

## CLIMBING MONT BLANC and the *ancien passage*

The first serious attempt to climb Mont Blanc was made in 1774 by Horace de Saussure from Geneva. Twelve years later, Jacques Balmat and Dr. Michel Paccard set foot on the summit at 6.30 p.m on the 8th August 1786.

For such a monumental achievement the lack of any account by either of the explorers themselves is still an unsolved mystery. The subsequent falling out between Balmat and Paccard as to who was the stronger and more intrepid climber almost overshadowed their conquest. As such, the most reliable source remains that of Balmat transcribed and written down by the chronicler and climber Marc Bourrit in November of the same year. In 1784 and 1785 Bourrit had attempted the ascent of Mont Blanc and subsequently failed again in 1788. Given his own considerable experience on the mountain, there is little doubt that his transcription of Balmat and Paccard's feat, entitled *Le Premier Voyage fait au sommet du Mont Blanc, le 8 août dernier* is as close as possible to what took place.



Mont Blanc: the north face showing the 'Grands Mulets' route and that of the *ancien passage* in yellow. The Grands Mulets hut shown in green.

Indeed, Bourrit's description of their final few steps captures the excitement of the moment:

*'The snow is firm, and he sees that but a few paces remain to come at the top of the mountain; he gains it! What joy! ... What a spectacle then presented itself to these travellers! The heaven was black, the constellation of the day in its decline appeared immense; its rays, of a superb purple colour, darted through the vast extent, and, as it descended, it seemed to free itself a passage through the earth.'*

The route which Balmat and Paccard took from Chamonix to the summit of Mont Blanc was carefully documented in Bourrit's account. It became known as the *ancien passage*. And from the outset, and especially on the more official ascent made in 1787 by Horace de Saussure, it transpired that the hardest and most treacherous part of the climb was lower down on the Bossons and la Côte glaciers.

De Saussure recorded it as such:

*'The entry on the glacier proved easy, but soon one plunges into a labyrinth of seracs divided by great crevasses, some entirely open, some choked with snow, others crossed by frail arches which are the only safe means of traversing them. In places a narrow ice-ridge serves as a bridge ... There are moments when it seems that it must be impossible to find a way out.'*

This section of the climb lies above what is called La Jonction at the top of the long rock ridge going up Mont Blanc's north face from the Chamonix valley. It took Balmat and Paccard fourteen hours to get to the summit from there which tells us a good deal about the route-finding involved. The two glaciers which fork at this point, (this 'junction') the Bossons and the Taconnaz, have now shrunk drastically. The change since the mid-twentieth century alone is staggering and once the last snows melt



Above the 'Junction'

in early summer, the scale and width of the crevasses are daunting. It is therefore no surprise that today almost all climbers get to the summit via the long but technically modest Gôuter and Bosses ridges. For all its obstacles the *ancien passage* was nonetheless then the only route up Mont Blanc. All nineteen known ascents after 1787 took the *ancien passage* and it was not until the 1860s that climbers began to look for variations on the mountain's north and northwest faces.

Having reached the Grands Mulets rocks, the early climbers would spend the night in a tent or bivouac. The first mention of a rudimentary shelter at the Grands Mulets comes from an ascent made by a Mr. Woodley in August 1788 but it was not until 1853 that some Chamonix guides built a hut at a cost of 1680 francs. It measured eighteen by eight feet in length and width and included a stove, a table and four rustic benches.

Setting out from the shelter, the line of ascent went almost straight up the glacier to the Petit Plateau and thereafter gaining the Grand Plateau below the upper north face. The section between the Petit and the Grand Plateau is constantly under threat from immense *seracs* as was the case back in the late 1780s when Horace de Saussure noted: 'We took twenty minutes to cross this plateau, which seemed to us very long for since the guides' last ascent it had been swept by two enormous ice avalanches, and we had to cross their debris in fear of being overtaken by another... One cannot but reflect in passing on the danger from these avalanches.'

Turning to those first sources again, this time Dr. Paccard's pamphlet *Sur le premier voyage au sommet du Mont Blanc* which attempted to rival and even discredit Balmat's version, the sense of awe at arriving at the Grand Plateau comes across:

*'After mounting another steep incline we found ourselves, about 3p.m, on the great snow plain. From here there is scarcely anything to be seen but snow, pure and of a dazzling whiteness, contrasting strangely with the almost black sky of these lofty regions. No living being is to be seen, no trace of vegetation; it is the abode of frost and silence. Arriving in this wilderness late in the afternoon, with no possibility of shelter or help, we had need of all our strength and courage to pursue our course.'*



Christophe leading up the Glacier des Bossons with the Aiguille du Midi behind

He needed the space and moment to ready himself and then we all got going from down below the hut at 9 a.m. It turned out to be one of the hottest days of the year. By leaving early we managed to escape the worst of the heat and most importantly ascend whilst the snow was still firm. Every few hours we would stop to drink something and find somewhere for James to make sketches. In the approaches to the Petit and Grand Plateaus we encountered some gargantuan crevasses and once the angle of the slope increased, we were threading our way up towards what looked like a huge amphitheatre of snow and ice.



James painting below the Dôme du Goûter





**The Ancien Passage**

oil on acrylic on board, 42 x 42cm.

Leslie Stephen wrote how he wished he could swap his pen for Loppé's brush. In this instance, James deftly translates Dr. Paccard's first impression of arriving at the Grand Plateau into paint:

*'From here there is scarcely anything to be seen but snow, pure and of a dazzling whiteness, contrasting strangely with the almost black sky of these lofty regions. No living being is to be seen, no trace of vegetation; it is the adobe of frost and silence.'* The stark high-altitude landscapes lend themselves to a monochromatic palette. It imparts a timeless and surreal sense of the place. James has always been interested in Gerhard Richter's black and white paintings and although this composition is mainly black and white, he injected some blue into the sky and tried to achieve a sense of distance and scale by using soft edges on the summit sliding to a hard edge on the Arête des Bosses. *Ancien Passage* is much more about the void, the space created and delineated by the mountain, than it is about Mont Blanc.



**Chamonix from the Arête des Bosses**

oil on acrylic on canvas, 112x112cm.

James has always been intrigued by the notion that the early summiters on Mont Blanc were visible from the centre of Chamonix. His arresting composition attempts to describe the elevation gain and how far away the town seems from near the summit of Mont Blanc. At this height one is in a surreal world and one's gaze seems to extend to the edge of the world, but then the view back down to Chamonix provides a connection with the everyday. To some degree, the pictorial composition has been squashed together to include the Aiguille du Midi with the distinctive profile of the Dents du Midi poking up far off in the distance.

**Last light on the summit: the Grandes Jorasses**  
oil on acrylic on canvas, 150 x 220cm.

Some of the most famous peaks in the western Alps all align when seen from the top of Mont Blanc. In the middle of the composition are the formidable Grandes Jorasses, with the Dent du Géant at its western end, directly behind it is the Grand Combin, and then along the horizon, from left to right, the Weisshorn, Dent Blanche and the Matterhorn. In *Sunset on Mont Blanc*, Leslie Stephen wrote: 'There, for example, was the grim Matterhorn: its angular dimensions were of infinitesimal minuteness.'

