



## *Brushes with Eternity*

### **Landscape Art and Photography in the Canadian Rockies**

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE LATE nineteenth century that the combined influence of the Romantic poets and the advent of the railway began to alter the perceptual archetype of wilderness. The principal vehicle for the evolution of a mountain landscape aesthetic was the notion of the sublime. The sublime was generally taken to mean a pleasing dread that was felt when the forces of nature overwhelmed the familiar, with an aesthetic transcendence that permanently altered one's worldview. The rapturous terror that travellers experienced in mountain landscapes was an ultimate expression of the sublime. Giddy young Romantics started visiting mountain landscapes in droves to experience the gloom and the glory of the high places.

The evolution of the Romantic mindset was timely, indeed. The ideals of Goethe, Shelley, Wordsworth and Blake were readily absorbed into the expectations of Victorian travellers already ecstatic with the challenge of exploration in the suddenly expanded geography of hope that was the New World. Such exploration would be made much easier by train.

In 1885, CPR president William Cornelius Van Horne thought that the burgeoning aesthetic of the Romantics could “fuel” the engines of the

railway's great westbound trains. Almost overnight the lone land of the West, with its stupendous peaks and roaring rivers, became a symbol of the purity of experience that Romantic poets celebrated. Van Horne touched an aesthetic nerve that brought people from all over the world. Locals were stunned when flocks of foreigners started arriving by train to experience the beauty. All that the locals had seen, at first at least, were rocks and trees.

Until the railway was completed in 1885, few painters made their way as far west as the Rockies. The country was simply too remote and dangerous to visit. When the railway was completed, it began to hire artists to interpret the grandeur of the mountain West. Famous early Canadian painters like Lucius O'Brien, F.M. Bell-Smith and Marmaduke Matthews focused artistic attention on the mountains surrounding railway hotels at Banff, Lake Louise, Field and Rogers Pass.<sup>1</sup> While the significance of the work of these painters was immediately recognized within a small circle of Eastern aficionados, most Canadians never saw these early paintings. These works are of great importance to us today, however, because they represent the foundation of Canadian artistic landscape sensibilities especially as they relate to the mountain west.

As cheap colour lithography had yet to be developed, early railway advertising depicted what is now the Mountain Parks by way of black and white engravings. Though advertising engravings were largely based on photographs, many were stunning works of art. Among these best of these early engravings is one entitled *Rocky Mountains, Near Canmore* that appeared in a lavishly illustrated fifty-page Canadian Pacific pamphlet entitled *The New Highway to the East* (1888). The production of this pamphlet was personally supervised by Van Horne himself who was then Vice President of the CPR.

Images for this brochure were made by the Montreal photographic firm, William Notman and Son Photographic Studio, which sent two photographic parties to the Rockies in 1871 and 1884.<sup>2</sup> Led by Alfred Selwyn, Director of the Geological Survey of Canada and CPR chief engineer Sandford Fleming, the 1871 expedition made photographs of the proposed route the tracks would take through the mountains in the west. The resulting brochure was composed of half-tone reproductions of photographs and engravings made from Notman and Son photographs by American Bank Note Company artists.

Remarkable in their detail and accuracy of perspective, these fine reproductions tell us a great deal about ecological state a century ago of what is now this World Heritage Site. A particularly beautiful engraving



**PAINTERS IN THE  
ROCKIES**

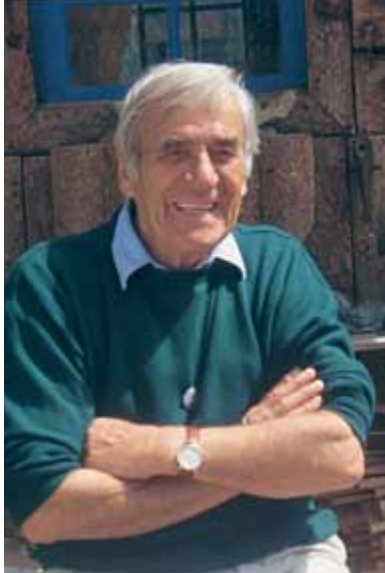
Alexander Phimister Proctor  
painting at Maligne Lake  
circa 1920.

*Photograph courtesy of the Whyte  
Museum of the Canadian Rockies,  
Banff, Alberta.*

based on a Notman photograph of the Three Sisters illustrates what the Bow Valley looked like before the town surrounded the main line of the railway. Though the valley has been burned over, it is still wilderness. A thin steel line snakes coldly through the few remaining spruce while overhead an overcast sky threatens summer rain.

It was not long after these engravings that the exciting new medium of photography began to influence the way people thought about Canada's western mountains. Mary Schäffer was already an accomplished photographer and well established watercolourist when she undertook her first expedition in search of Maligne Lake in 1907. That year, G.P. Putnam and Sons published *Alpine Flora of the Canadian Rockies*. Written by Stewardson Brown, curator of the Herbarium Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia, the book was illustrated with photographs and watercolours by Schäffer. The first artistic images we have of Maligne Lake and the Maligne Valley are the fine hand-tinted photographs that Schäffer made into lantern slides so that she could show her friends the wonders of what local First Nations called Chaba Imne. These, along with images taken by the Vaux family, Walter Wilcox, and later by Byron Harmon, remain among the most cherished historical photographs of the Rockies.

The moment it became possible to print black and white photographs cheaply the world of seeing was utterly transformed. Byron Harmon



#### **BRUNO ENGLER**

Bruno Engler's life extended over most of the twentieth century. He photographed on two continents and in two of the world's greatest mountain ranges. His images span the more than half a century of skiing and mountaineering history in Canada. Though best known for his photography, Bruno Engler's considerable legend was founded to a large extent on the gracious way he opened himself to others. He had an absolutely irresistible presence: it was as impossible to resist Bruno's sincerity and warmth as it was to resist the joy and humour of his stories.

*Photograph by R.W. Sandford.*

was at the forefront of this movement. Harmon explored and took more photographs of the Mountain Parks region than any other early photographer.<sup>3</sup>

While a great many other photographers later made good livings and established enduring reputations in the mountain West, Harmon was the first to travel widely with a camera in the region. Like the Vaux family who visited in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and W.J. Oliver of Calgary, Harmon made images from very large negatives that today still yield prints of extraordinary clarity and quality. Other photographers contributed to local mountain culture in this tradition. These included Harry Rowed in Jasper and Bruno Engler in Banff.

While a few contemporary photographers like George Brybycin travel as widely in the backcountry as Harmon did, only the large format black and white images of Craig

Richards demonstrate today the capacity to represent the same powerful and immediate sense of perspective and place that the Vaux family and Byron Harmon captured a century ago. It could be argued that the true sense of mountain place is as well preserved in contemporary painting as it is in photography. But even painting continues to wrestle with the scale and nature of Canada's western mountains.

#### **GENERATIONS OF PAINTERS TRYING TO GET THE ROCKIES RIGHT**

FORTUNATELY, THE Canadian Pacific Railway didn't exist just to serve tourists. At the turn of the century, the railway brought settlers west by the thousands with the promise of a new start in the West. Professional artists were among these immigrants. By the 1920s, a widening circle of artists were living in a number of Western Canadian cities. Art societies began pressing for the creation of art schools and galleries in bigger centres like Edmonton and Calgary. Once established, these schools attracted well-established Eastern Canadian and European-trained artists and instructors. Many of these established painters were reluctant to abandon the European influence that, in their minds, gave credibility to their work. A few, however, began to adjust their techniques and pictorial approaches to the massive, colourful environments of the mountain West.

Among the first Canadian artists to allow themselves to be influenced by the unique character of the Canadian landscape was the Group

of Seven. They formed in Toronto in 1914, and included Lawren Harris, J.E.H. MacDonald, A.Y. Jackson, Frederick Varley, Frank Carmichael, Arthur Lismer and Frank Johnston. Though their initial departures from the mainstream of Canadian painting were brutalized by critics, it gradually became apparent that these painters were creating a uniquely Canadian way of seeing. Here, at last, were paintings that mirrored the immensity and loneliness that were foundations of the Canadian spirit. There was no warmth in these paintings and little sentiment or humour. The emotional appeal of these paintings lay in sobriety and austerity that were at the heart of the grandeur of Canada. What the Group of Seven painted was the essence of the sublime – and there was no more sublime a place in all of Canada than the mountain West.

Members of the Group of Seven began employing their bold new styles in representing the Rockies in 1924. In the late summer and early fall of that year Lawren Harris visited Jasper with A.Y. Jackson. They used Jasper Park Lodge as a centre for expeditions to the Colin Range and the Tonquin Valley. Harris and Jackson also explored the Maligne Valley. They painted at Maligne Lake, Opal Hills, and Coronet Creek in what are now called the Queen Elizabeth Ranges. Harris would return again and again to Jasper and to Mount Robson creating some of the finest mountain paintings ever done in Canada.

The Rockies began to establish a national profile in the arts when members of the Group of Seven became summer instructors at the Banff School of Fine Arts (now the Banff Centre for the Arts). One of the most prominent painters on the faculty of the school during the 1930s was A.Y. Jackson. He and J.E.H. Macdonald were the only members of the group to establish a lasting relationship with the communities of Banff and Canmore.

Perhaps the most influential painter and teacher to have come to the Rockies was Walter Phillips. Walter Joseph Phillips was born at Barton-On-Humber, Lincolnshire, England in 1884. At twenty-eight, Phillips was building the reputation for artistic competence that would follow him for the rest of his life. By 1912, however, Phillips was ready to leave England. He and his wife chose Winnipeg by sticking a pin into the centre of a map of Canada. After arriving in June of 1913, Walter was appointed Art Master at St. John's Technical High School in the city's multi-racial North End. Initially, Phillips painted in the European style he had learned in England. Gradually, however, the Canadian landscape began to impose itself. Soon he was painting the prairies as they were, rather than as a European was trained to see them.

In 1947 Phillips illustrated Frederick Niven's *Colour in the Canadian Rockies*.<sup>4</sup> The work in this book was a testament to the artist's remarkable capacity to render rock and water and light into images that radiated an inspired sense of mountain place. It also stands as one of the very best early books about modern travel – particularly on horseback – in the expanded geography of what are now the Mountain Parks.

In the summer of 1940, Phillips began teaching at the Banff School of Fine Arts. In 1941, Walter and Gladys Phillips moved to Calgary where He became an instructor at the Institute of Technology and Art. In 1943, they moved again, this time to St. Julian Road in Banff. Walter painted in their living room.

Phillips spent the next fifteen years in Banff teaching, painting and making woodblocks of the magnificent scenery of the Rockies. During that time, he became a tireless champion of Canadian art and artists. Through his writings, Phillips introduced a generation of artists who made formative contributions to Canadian culture through their painting.

Phillips was irritated by the fact that many artists residing in Canada were slaves to techniques that did not allow them to give themselves to the nature that surrounded them. Phillips admired painters who let the landscape speak for itself. One of his favourite painters was Thomas Fripp. Fripp was a well-trained English watercolourist who immigrated to British Columbia in 1893. Phillips delighted in Fripp's capacity to reproduce the delicate, opalescent harmonies of changing mountain weather. Phillips pointed out that, though the art aristocracy in Toronto found him reactionary, Fripp had been able to get the mountains right. If you knew and understood the alpine, then Fripp's sense of cold drama would stay with you.

Phillips also admired Carl Rungius. Born in Berlin in 1869, Rungius was already an established wildlife artist by the time he immigrated to the United States after a hunting and painting expedition to Wyoming in 1895. In 1910 Rungius was invited to the Canadian Rockies by outfitter and guide Jimmy Simpson. Though Rungius painted in the Rockies every summer for the next twenty-five years, his work was virtually unknown in Canada. In 1933, Phillips drew the attention of the Canadian public to Rungius by proclaiming his mastery in portraying the spirit of Canada's mountains and wildlife.

Phillips also admired Alfred C. Leighton. Leighton was born in Hastings, Sussex, England in 1901. After suffering serious injuries in a plane crash during World War I, Leighton briefly became a toy designer before

establishing a studio to make architectural models. A model he built of the port of Liverpool came to the attention of the Canadian Pacific Railway, and in 1924 Leighton became Chief Commercial Artist with the CPR. In this capacity Leighton designed brochures and advertising promotions.

In 1925, Leighton made his first trip to the Canadian West to paint mountain scenes for the railway. In 1929, Leighton decided to move to Canada and became Director of Art at the Institute of Technology and Art in Calgary. It was here that he befriended Walter Phillips, who helped him establish the school as a prominent force in artistic development on the prairies.

Word of the exciting artistic culture associated with painting in the Rockies quickly spread, attracting new talent. Nicholas de Grandmaison was born in southern Russia in 1892. After immigrating to Canada in 1927, he began painting the portraits of trappers, traders, Métis and Native peoples in The Pas, Manitoba. When his friend Alfred Leighton fell ill in the fall of 1931, de Grandmaison took over his instruction work at the Institute of Technology and Art. Walter Phillips wrote that de Grandmaison painted Indians in a way that inspired others to see their sophistication and abiding dignity. De Grandmaison's timeless portraits define our relationship to history and place to this day.

One of the great teachers of the Group of Seven tradition was Illingworth Kerr. Kerr was born in Lumsden, Saskatchewan in 1905 and was taught art by his mother before travelling to Toronto to study under Arthur Lismer, J.E.H. Macdonald, Frederick Varley and J.W. Beatty. When Kerr returned to the prairies, he made it his ambition to encompass a complete interpretation of the prairies in his work. He wanted to do for the prairies what the Group of Seven had done for northern Ontario and the Rockies. In 1947, Kerr came to Calgary to direct the Art School of the Provincial Institute of Technology and Art. Under his guidance, this school later became the Alberta College of Art and Design, and influenced and trained hundreds of local painters and sculptors. Somehow, Kerr still found time outside his administrative responsibilities to paint and, later in life, generated impressive results in the Rockies.

The increasing presence of the work of these artists encouraged Canadians to believe in the powerful aesthetic possessed by the landscapes in which they lived. Inspired visual affirmation of the qualities of place contributed to the gradual emergence of a mountain culture in which respect for the landscape was uniquely commensurate with the

degree of protection the landscape was afforded. While cultural homogenization was occurring almost everywhere else, in the Rockies, how locals lived remained inseparable from where they lived. It soon became apparent that it was exactly this quality that made the Rockies such a desirable place in which to live and such an unforgettable place to visit.

By the mid to late 1970s there were a lot of artists living in and around the Rocky Mountain parks. Now there are dozens of excellent galleries in Canmore, Banff, Lake Louise and Jasper. Art galleries promoting art related to this expanded area have created far more than just sales outlets for local painters and artists. They have become an organizing principal around which a remarkable art culture has cumulatively developed and emerged in this region. Due to good art galleries there is a healthy, vibrant and successful art community that flourishes through the celebration of the natural landscape values protected within the Rocky Mountain Parks. Painters of the calibre of Alice Saltiel Marshall, Marilyn Kinsella, Donna-Jo Massie, Max Elliott, Leona Amman, Michael Cameron, Robert Sinclair and Robert Genn – to name just a few – have established considerable reputations for their portrayal of landscapes in the mountain West. Many of the best contemporary mountain artists are women, and there is an emergence of outstanding work by First Nations artists such as Terry McCue.

Since landscape art is now a vital part of Canadian mountain culture, much is expected of it in terms of how it affirms our culture. This suggests that the role of art in our society must be held constantly to account. It is reasonable to ask how influenced has our art been by genuine experience of the mountains of Canada, as opposed to its own internal stylistic traditions. We might also ask if art is keeping up in its interpretation of the changes that are taking place in our mountain places. How much of our mountain art is simply pretty picture making and how much of it is telling us what is actually happening to the mountain places that we love?

There has never been a time in our history when we have needed art more to help us re-affirm the connection to place that is required to balance our needs with those of the landscapes that have defined us. In order to help art perform this service, we need to confirm and encourage a link between what mountain art portrays, and our experience of place and how it is changing. In order to do so successfully, it may be useful to look deeply into literature as well as art to confirm our appreciation of place.