



**FROM REALISM TO ABSTRACTION:
THE ART OF JB TAYLOR**
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1 | Introduction

In the creaking, whispering world of rock and ice, where fragile vegetation can never hope to soften or obscure the uncompromising austerity of the environment, he discovered a light that diffused in eerie blues and purples, strata that showed the marks of enormous, relentless pressure, and crevasses of milky opacity.¹

Ron MacGregor, *The Edmonton Journal*

John Benjamin or J. B. (Jack) Taylor (1917–1970) was born and grew up in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. It is a historic city, with strong English roots, and the location of the conference that resulted in the birth of Canada. Its downtown core comprises the initial five hundred lots surveyed by Samuel Johannes Holland (1728–1801), a Royal Engineer and the first Surveyor General of British North America. Three rivers meet at its harbour, which opens into Northumberland Strait. While growing up in this typically picturesque place with some of the oldest buildings in English Canada, Taylor was exposed to the landscapes of the maritime region. Rocky coves and inlets, fishing hamlets and, in the interior, small farms are all on a comfortable human scale. Only, the sea, the limitless deep, embodied the grandeur of nature. This is the world that he learned to paint under the tutelage of his first teacher Mabel Gass and his mentor Frank Vincent DuMond at the Art Students League of New York.

As Taylor travelled westward, like other Canadians and visitors, he was awed by the expanses of the three prairie “steps” rising from Manitoba, to Saskatchewan and, finally, Alberta. His wartime service in the Canadian Air Force enabled him to traverse the Great Plains by train and airplane. Taylor depicted what he saw as backdrops for some of his aircraft paintings used to train air crew in recognition during World War II, as well as panoramas and murals for messes and recreation rooms.

None of this, however, prepared him for what he would experience in the Rocky Mountains when he first taught at the Banff School of Fine Arts in summer of 1948. Taylor shared the sense of discovery and awe of the first explorers, surveyors, and settlers as they encountered the Rocky Mountains. It is no wonder that the laying of the Canadian Pacific Railway through the Rockies became central to the narrative of nation-building and a rich source for artistic production. For Taylor, the journey westward was not only a physical journey from the cradle of nationhood in Charlottetown to the Rockies, but also a journey from art student to mature artist.

The Canadian Rockies became the predominant subject matter of his artistic production. Unlike other mountain systems made up of granite and other rocks resulting from volcanic processes, the Rockies are largely composed of sedimentary rock. The Rockies, at the western edge of what was a prehistoric inland sea that covered the plains, were formed from the layered sediments at the bottom of this sea. Limestone, dolomite, sandstone, and shale were layered and, over millennia, were cracked, bent, and thrust up by tectonic forces. The movement of ice sheets and glaciers, as well as the forces of erosion, further shaped them. There is a sense not only of grandeur but also of time immemorial evidenced in the tiny micro-organisms from ancient times contained in the dolomite and limestone formations. There are also glaciers and icefields, the remnants of the last era of glaciation when the continent was covered in ice. The Rocky Mountains form part of the Continental Divide, which can be considered the spine of North America with river systems draining to the East and West from the mountain slopes. The vistas are endless, both eastward and westward, and the terrain has a raw feel to it as if it had just been formed by an invisible Creator.

This is the terrain that captured Taylor's imagination and to which he would return again and again even after he stopped teaching in Banff. Just as figurative artists would benefit from studying anatomy, painters of mountains can benefit from studying geology. Taylor did this and became friends with professors in that discipline at the University of Alberta, where he began his careers as a professor/artist. Taylor also studied art history and fell in love with the ancient buildings of Italy. It's as if his artistic imagination needed to be able to move from the depiction of classical civilization in Europe to the untamed nature of the New World as he experienced it in the Rockies. His keen eye saw the structure in nature in both the Old and New Worlds. The "idea of mountains" became his great theme, serving as a visual commentary on life and national identity. The Rockies were not only the place of the heart for him but also the source of his artistic inspiration. It would be the jagged peaks and tumbled rock falls, caverns, cirques, remnants of glacial ice, and ice fields that he would capture in representational and abstract works largely in watercolour and oil. These challenged him to explore new media to represent the texture of

rock strata in the presence and absence of light. He did this through the layering of acrylic paint, sawdust, sand, and other materials. Ultimately, the mountains would be the resting place of his ashes. In May, 1970, a few months before his death, he wrote:

Climbing among the glaciers, you become aware of time. You can see the sun, wind, and rain that caused the great masses of ice to change their forms over many thousands of years.... The final painting evolved out of the essential elements of art, that is, the concern for a basic abstract design. Whether or not an artist uses a subject as a point of departure, his main aim is to construct on canvas the simplest statement he can make.... With knowledge of the subject matter – in this case the glacial structure – the artist can be much freer in his experiments; he can concentrate on his feelings about the subject which best express his ideas. *Opabin #1* is one idea and is an expression of the grandeur of those magnificent glaciers.²

The following pages describe his life and art, and place his work in the context of Albertan and Canadian art history. Taylor's initial influences were the American landscape painters of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Later, he would be influenced by British artist John Piper. Ultimately, he would move from a realistic representation of nature to an intuitive perception of the essential elements of landscape – rock, water, and sky – as they are impacted by light. Using acrylics and other media, Taylor presented these fundamental elements and made a breakthrough from representational art to abstraction. Rather than presenting mountains in all their majesty, he captured the “idea of mountains” in a unique and very personal style.

Over forty years after his death, his work deserves re-examination, not only because of its subject matter and technique, but also because it was an aspect of Alberta's coming of age in the context of Canadian art.

