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## Canadian parks and protected areas through artists' eyes: transforming the Western Canadian Rockies

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# CANADIAN PARKS AND PROTECTED AREAS THROUGH ARTISTS' EYES:

## TRANSFORMING THE WESTERN CANADIAN ROCKIES

by Nancy Townshend  
June 2008

This paper explores the artistic responses to the environment of the Canadian Rockies by six Canadian artists drawn from the Traditional, Modern and Contemporary Eras. The six artists – CPR artists Frederic Bell-Smith who arrived at Glacier House two summers after the completion of the CPR and in the year of the Rocky Mountains Park Act in 1887, and A. C. Leighton, Group of Seven members Lawren Harris and J. E. H. Macdonald, Jin-me-Yoon and Jan Kabatoff – share the Canadian Rockies as sources of inspiration but not in their aesthetic processing, nor resulting art. Far from it. This paper examines the value and meaning the Rockies held for them. It discusses art that explores the construction of Canadian identity, sense of place and effects of climate change.

Receding glaciers as a result of global warming inspire Canmore-based contemporary artist, **Jan Kabatoff**. She describes glaciers as “the womb of Mother Earth because they produce life-sustaining water.”<sup>i</sup>

On her first study of a glacier, the Athabasca Glacier on the Columbia Icefields, with Everest climber Sharon Wood in 2002, Kabatoff “was thrilled with the textures, shapes and especially in the toe of the Athabasca Glacier.”<sup>ii</sup> The artist took numerous close-up photographs “of crevasses, ice crystals, small pools of ancient water, rivulets, moulins and millwells with rushing, swirling water”<sup>iii</sup> as source material.

For a trip on the Bugaboo Glacier in 2005, she rented a professional audio recorder, two twenty-foot long cables, two microphones and camera from the Banff Centre that were lowered into crevasses. “I recorded sounds of glacier water dripping inside crevasses, burbling over ice and rocks, rushing in rivulets and flowing into streams.”<sup>iv</sup>

*Lowell Lake, Bergy Bits Study #1 – 9* (2007) suggest Kabatoff’s sense of small, more human-size chunks of ice that have broken off from large icebergs on Lowell Lake at the toe of Lowell Glacier in the Yukon, part of a World Heritage Site. In these encaustic works, the artist built up layers and layers of melted beeswax and white pigment, then scraped and added little columns of umber and a black background to convey the stark and numerous

“bergy bits” floating in the water. Their smooth surface and tranquil square format belie the artist’s central message: “By the time we touch them, it will be too late.”<sup>v</sup> Together all nine *Lowell Lake, Bergy Bits Studies* give “a sense of fragmentation and urgency” to the rapid rate at which glaciers in the Yukon are melting.

Overall Kabatoff is inspired by the textures, subtle colours and design patterns of glaciers that reflect its layers of history. Glaciers become hidden places; the artist regards crevasses as deep mysterious metaphorical places.

Kabatoff is presently (2008) documenting melting glaciers world-wide, in an ambitious project titled *Seven Continents, Seven Glaciers*. “I want to combine as many glaciers voices together in an audio installation as a global chorus of glacial voices... I want to bring all continents together. We must be mindful of the entire planet, of the interconnectedness of us all.”<sup>vi</sup>

Artistic concerns to save the planet Earth as a result of global warming were not an issue in 1887, the year CPR artist **Frederic Bell - Smith** (1846 – 1923) first arrived on a CPR pass in Glacier National Park, and stayed for two months at Glacier House near the Rogers Pass. Bell – Smith painted light and atmosphere, especially present in the surging Illecillewaet River and cloud – girt glaciers of the Selkirks such as Illecillewaet Glacier. Forty percent of Bell - Smith’s artworks inspired by the Rockies have titles associated with “the most varied and interesting... scenery”<sup>vii</sup> of Glacier National Park. To paint *The Heart of the Selkirks*, Bell – Smith hiked up to “Avalanche Crest”, some 3000 feet above Glacier House, where after a storm,

“there was an opening – yes, there, through a rift, the sun was shining on the Asulkan Glacier...and then – oh wonders! Such a sight as I can never forget. I jumped and shouted in my excitement. The clouds were rising from the valley in long festoons, the sun, lighting up glaciers and snow fields and breaking in gleams through the fast diminishing clouds, produced such a scene...the impression made was so vivid and ineffaceable, that I was able to make, what many consider to be my best painting of a mountain subject.”<sup>viii</sup>

Altogether Bell – Smith painted at least 320 artworks inspired by the Canadian Rockies during sixteen summers from 1887 until his last trip in 1918. Twenty percent of these have titles relating to the Banff National Park, twenty percent to the Rockies (locations undisclosed), twelve percent to the Fraser River (there was a CPR dining station called Fraser Canyon House at North Bend, B. C.) and ten percent to Yoho National Park. His

annotation for an artwork titled *A Glacier Tarn in the Canadian Rockies* indicates warmer weather around 1904: “This sheet of water known as McArthur Lake, at a height of 8,000 feet above sea level, is fed by the huge glacier from which the bergs are constantly breaking off, its outlet (subterranean) was first discovered by the artist’s party in 1904...”<sup>ix</sup> In his studio in Toronto, the artist continued to create artworks inspired by the Rockies up until his death in 1923.

Bell – Smith was one of the first artists from Ontario to open up Canadian art to include the Canadian Rockies as satisfying subject-matter. In 1891, Bell – Smith exhibited his Rocky Mountain artworks in several high-profile shows: the Art Association of Montreal, the 19<sup>th</sup> Annual Exhibition of the Ontario Society of Artists, the Royal Canadian Academy’s 12<sup>th</sup> Exhibition in Toronto, and the Toronto Industrial Exhibition (112 artworks). In 1905, as President of the Ontario Society of Artists and a member of the RCA, Bell – Smith wrote a letter to His Excellency the Earl Grey, G.C.M.G., Governor General of Canada that reveals Central Canada’s earliest preoccupation with defining appropriate Canadian art:

“Our Land, Sir, is indeed Fair:...Fair are her...mountain heaths with shining glaciers crowned;...she supplies the sculptor and painter with unlimited material for the exercise of their artistic skill, and our Country is ripe for the development of a distinctly Canadian Art, which if intelligently recognized should result in master-works comparable with those of older Lands.

We welcome your Excellency...to sympathize with us in our purpose to promote in this Country all that is most desirable in a National Art.”<sup>x</sup>

For the next twenty – five years Central Canada assiduously expounded what constituted a national Canadian art and what did not. The hegemony of Central Canada in Canadian art, and its colonization of regions outside of Toronto and Ottawa, began here.

The chief commercial artist for the Canadian Pacific, **A. C. Leighton** (1900 – 1965), attempted a colonization of a different kind, an Anglo-Canadian one on to a nascent Canadian Rocky Mountain culture. Trained in the British watercolour tradition, Leighton of the Traditional Era championed subtle tonal values or tonalism in his alpine and foothills paintings.<sup>xi</sup>

During his first trip to Canada in 1925, British-born and trained A. C. Leighton described the Canadian Rockies:

“The grandeur of the scenery, the purity and beauty of the colouring being indescribable...The scale of the landscape was tremendous... something much larger was necessary to portray the magnitude, the imposing force and dignity of those mountains.”<sup>xii</sup>

Leighton became one of Alberta’s earliest artists to explore the Rockies in depth, first with the Trail Riders of the Canadian Rockies<sup>xiii</sup> (founded by his Canadian boss, John Murray Gibbon, and on his invitation) where he traveled to McArthur Pass via Marble Canyon and Goodsir Plateau in 1925 and Mt. Assiniboine via Allenby Creek in 1927. Then Leighton and his wife Barbara organized their own pack-horse trips which were more conducive to painting on the spot. Eventually Leighton considered the Canadian Rockies to be “the most responsive artistic material in the world.”<sup>xiv</sup>

The watercolour, *Boulder Pass, Skoki* (1935), is exemplary in its tonalism. Leighton used a Claude glass which gave a low-key reflection. By 1935 Walter Phillips described Leighton’s watercolours as “ultimate perfection” and Leighton as a “master of his medium.”

Leighton was the first instructor at what became the Banff School of Fine Arts in 1935, having taught his students for two weeks at the Brewster Ranch at the confluence of the Bow and Kananaskis Rivers in 1933 and 1934. (Leighton became Head of the Art Department of the Tech in Calgary in 1929.)

Leighton continued painting mountains to his dying days. “...the mountains, the peaks, the glaciers; that’s where I want to be and that’s what I want to paint.”<sup>xv</sup>

**J.E.H. MacDonald**<sup>xvi</sup> (1873 – 1932) of the Modern Era painted scenes of Lake O’Hara from 1924 to his death in 1932 that were typically Modernist, rich in colour and showing other formal interests such as surface, pattern and composition. The artist described Lake O’Hara as “emerald and violet...emerald and malachite, and jade, and rainbow green...” in his article titled “A Glimpse of the West.”<sup>xvii</sup> Commenting on a sunset at Lake McArthur, MacDonald noted its “rosy light pink flame. Biddle on fire looking like furnace pot then into orange crimson with lower full of deep burning purple.”<sup>xviii</sup>

MacDonald had secured CPR passes for the 1924, 1925 and 1926 trips to the Rockies from John Murray Gibbon, Leighton’s CPR boss. MacDonald’s initial re-creation of those mountains in early works vary from loose flowing brushwork in *Morning, Lake O’Hara* (1924), to overly designed *Mount Goodsir, Yoho Park* (1925) with its not credible ranges, to *Lake McArthur*

(1925) with its balanced composition. *Lake Oesa and Mount Lefroy* (c. 1928) is brightly lit, cropped for shallower spatial recession, and *Rain, Wiwaxy Peaks, Lake O'Hara* (1925) shows restraint with MacDonald contrasting young larches in the foreground to pale Wiwaxy Peaks in blue in the background. *September Snow on Mount Schaffer* (1929) shows spectacular dramatic lighting, and *Mount Odaray* (1930) directional brushwork.

*Mountain Solitude (Lake Oesa)* (1932) transcends MacDonald's overtly designed alpine paintings. It is subtle, in perfect harmony with the subject and mood of the painting. Snowflakes close to the picture plane bring the viewer into the scene, and unify the composition. Rendered in his Toronto studio during the last year of his life, *Mountain Solitude* is a lasting testament to the meaning that the Lake O'Hara area and Lake Oesa, in particular, held in MacDonald's life.

On the debut of the exhibiting of MacDonald's Rocky Mountain art in Toronto at the Art Gallery of Toronto and the Arts and Letters Club in 1925, Central Canada championed this art as quintessentially Canadian and indicative of how "national" the Group of Seven's art had become. This construction of Canadian identity – Central Canada's colonization of western Canada – prevails into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For Catharine Mastin, curator of the nationally circulating exhibition, *The Group of Seven in Western Canada* in 2002, "owing to the lack of large Group of Seven canvases in Western Canada, these unfortunate circumstances do much to explain the inability of the West to recognize itself in works that are unfamiliar owing to the history of art collection and exhibition in a regionalized Canada."<sup>xix</sup> Is that how Western Canada defines itself?

In contrast to MacDonald who often painted closer up alpine subjects and cropped mountain and lakes scenes, **Lawren Harris** (1885 – 1970) often painted wide vistas, panoramas. Although MacDonald as a person was influenced by Walt Whitman, Henry Thoreau and John Muir, Harris imbued his art of the Canadian Rockies with spiritual intent.

Harris regarded mountains as "holy places. They mediate between this world and the realms beyond."<sup>xx</sup> Harris's art takes on certain equivalences: monumental uplifting forms, transcendent light metaphorically suggesting a spiritual force, a sense of wonder, and reduced colours.

*Maligne Lake, Jasper Park* (1924) from Harris's first post-WWI trip to the Canadian Rockies is built around two almost symmetrical axis, one horizontal, one vertical. From two prominent peaks anchoring the painting on our left and right, Harris depicts mountain ranges receding into the far

central distance and reflected in the still Maligne Lake. Cold turquoise and blue colours reinforce the sense of perfect wilderness.

For *Mount Lefroy* (1930), a squared out (4 x 4) preparatory drawing (c. 1930) preceded the final painting. Harris maximizes the upward thrust of this singular peak using smoothly modeled forms and colours relating to theosophical states of being. Harris had been a member of the Toronto Theosophical Society since 1924. He was aware of the theosophical Planes of Nature from matter to spirit expressed in colour as published in Charles Leadbeater's *Man Visible and Invisible* (1902), Plate IV. In *Mount Lefroy* (1930), a prayer-like triangular form arises from sculptural brown rock matter lifting up to the spiritually imbued tinted yellow summit. Harris was well aware of the symbolism of an upward pointed triangle as spirit as published in Madame Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled, Theology*, vol. 2 (1877), in the Chaldeo-Jewish cosmogony. The abstracted Mount Lefroy near Lake Louise emanates radiant light signifying divine presence.

A couple of preparatory drawings (1928 and c. 1929) and an oil on panel titled *Isolation Peak* (c. 1929) with its luminous blue emanations radiating from the ascendant peak precede *Isolation Peak, Rocky Mountains* (1930). In this epic work a striking, singular triangular – shaped peak thrusts upward in a blue grey sky. Over undulating striated hills this brightly lit simplified peak stands for all mountains. The specificity that this could be Mont des Poilus with Arete Peak on our left in Yoho National Park, B.C. is gone. Moreover there is no peak called Isolation Peak in the Canadian Rockies. Harris is getting at universality.

Contemporary Canadian artist **Jin-me Yoon** (1960 - ) takes a post-colonial deconstructivist approach in *Souvenirs of Self: Lake Louise* (1991), a large Ektacolour – Supra photograph of a solemn-looking Korean-born artist wearing a Scandinavian sweater and brown oxfords standing in front of the traditionally cherished Canadian scene of Lake Louise and Victoria Glacier. Yoon takes on multiple personae of Asian, Asian – Canadian, woman, tourist and artist. Noting “I am interested in appropriating the genre of landscape photography to question the constructed ‘nature’ of Canadian identity”, she asks: “Imaged in the heroic setting of the Canadian Rockies, can I as a non-Western woman enjoy a ‘naturalized’ relationship to this landscape?”<sup>xxi</sup>

In effect, Yoon demands Canadian art to be more inclusive, of visible minorities, for instance. A Vancouverite, she breaks down the exclusivity of previously held national icons in Canadian art. By pointing out their foibles, the narrowness of the construction of each, she opens up Canadian art to other possibilities, and renews it. As Yoon so correctly notes about her art:

“It’s not the objects – it’s the social relations – that’s the work.”<sup>xxii</sup> Yoon is interested in the construction of Canadian identity, **and** cultural disruption and displacement.

At the Edmonton Art Gallery’s “Touring Home” exhibition of Yoon’s work in 1991, Yoon placed Harris’s *Athabasca Valley, Jasper Park* (1924) with its omnipotent single tree in the foreground from the EAG’s Collection directly across from *Souvenirs of Self: Lake Louise* (1991). Above the Harris she wrote:

“the lone tree/pitted and painted/against your sky/your mountains/your land”

Indirectly she asks: “is it your sky/mountains/land or ours too?”

In *A Group of Sixty-Seven* (1996), Yoon places a Korean – Canadian living in Vancouver in front of her re-creation of Lawren Harris’ *Maligne Lake* for a head and shoulder frontal view photograph. The artist then arranges sixty- seven of these photographs - 67 Korean Vancouverites participated - in a wall-sized grid. Again the artist disrupts established notions of Canadian national identity by challenging who can occupy a place, and obliquely referring to the very founding of Canada (1867) and, of course, the Group of Seven.

The Canadian Rockies have inspired Canadian artists to create profound Canadian art for over 120 years. All six artists in this paper - Kabatoff, Bell – Smith, Leighton, MacDonald, Harris and Yoon – significantly renewed Canadian art in their own way. For Bell – Smith, MacDonald and Harris and their Toronto intellectual and wealthy supporters and the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Rockies completed their utopian Canada. Yoon directly challenges these central Canadian constructions by questioning their Canadian identity. In her serious concern for the environment, Kabatoff regards glaciers in the Canadian Rockies on the North American continent as one of seven endangered continents because of global warming. Hopefully the Canadian Parks and Protected Areas will consider the place for these deserving images by Kabatoff, Bell – Smith, Leighton, MacDonald, Harris and Yoon in a nascent Canadian Rocky Mountain culture, and will bring more public awareness to these artists and their images. Then the transformative powers of this Canadian art will truly come home.

[3123 including endnotes]



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- <sup>i</sup> Jan Kabatoff in an interview with Nancy Townshend, April 9, 2008.
- <sup>ii</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>iii</sup> Jan Kabatoff, United Church presentation, April 6, 2008, 1.
- <sup>iv</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>v</sup> Jan Kabatoff in an interview with Nancy Townshend, April 9, 2008.
- <sup>vi</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>vii</sup> Frederic Bell – Smith, “An Artist’s Reminiscences,” *Canadian Alpine Journal*, 1918.
- <sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*
- <sup>ix</sup> #15, Ontario Society of Artists 30<sup>th</sup> Exhibition, 1905.
- <sup>x</sup> F. M. Bell – Smith in a 1905 letter to His Excellency the Earl Grey, Governor General of Canada, as quoted in Roger Boulet, *Frederic Marlett Bell – Smith \*1846 – 1923*, (Victoria: Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, 1977) 31.
- <sup>xi</sup> Please see Nancy Townshend, *A History of Art in Alberta 1905 – 1970*, (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2005), Chapter 2, pp. 7 - 29.
- <sup>xii</sup> A. C. Leighton, “Notes From Hastings,” as quoted in Nancy Townshend, *A History of Art in Alberta 1905 – 1970*, (Calgary: Bayeux Arts, 2005), 8.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Please see Nancy Townshend, “A. C. Leighton,” “Alberta Past,” *Visual Arts Newsletter*, Alberta Culture and Multiculture, vol. 8, #2, (April 1986), 23.
- <sup>xiv</sup> A. C. Leighton, *The Vancouver Sun*, 29 October 1927, as quoted in Nancy Townshend, *A History of Art in Alberta 1905 – 1970*, 8.
- <sup>xv</sup> A. C. Leighton as quoted by Terry Fenton, *A. C. Leighton and The Canadian Rockies*, (Banff: Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, 1989) 10.
- <sup>xvi</sup> a member of the Group of Seven, and Head of the Department of Graphic and Commercial Art at the Ontario College of Art from 1927 – 1932.
- <sup>xvii</sup> J.E.H. MacDonald, *The Canadian Bookman*, (vol.) vi, (no.) 11 (November 1924) 229.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Journal entry: September 4, 1925, J.E.H. MacDonald *fonds*, MG30, D111, vol. 1, Library and Archives Canada.
- <sup>xix</sup> Catharine M. Mastin, “East Views West,” *The Group of Seven in Western Canada*, (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 2002) 61.
- <sup>xx</sup> Lawren Harris, “Journey Toward The Light,” film produced and directed by Nancy Ryley, 1985.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Jin-me Yoon, *Touring Home*, Edmonton Art Gallery, 1991.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Jin-me Yoon, as quoted in Charlotte Townsend-Gault, “topographies: aspects of recent B. C. art,” *Canadian Art* vol. 14, #1, (Spring 1997).