Public Art and Alberta's Regionalism

Amanda Buessecker

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub_uht
Part of the Canadian History Commons, and the Contemporary Art Commons

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation
https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studentpub_uht/40

This Honors Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen amatangelo@byu.edu.
PUBLIC ART AND ALBERTA’S REGIONALISM

By
Amanda Buessecker

Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of graduation requirements for University Honors

Art History and Curatorial Studies
Brigham Young University
August 2018

Advisor: James Swensen
Honors Coordinator: Martha Peacock
This thesis is a case study of two contemporary, regionalist public artworks in Alberta: *Untitled*, by Fraser McGurk, and *Alberta Bound Panorama*, by Jason Carter. The province’s economic history is outlined as an important background factor to understanding contemporary public artworks. The two artists use symbols such as the train, compass, and grain elevator to connect a contemporary audience with Alberta’s past, reminding today’s residents of the province’s tradition of success. Even in locations that target “tourists,” these paintings use local symbols to emphasize a message of prosperity and unity to the local people of Alberta.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction ............................................................................................................................... 1

Background to Canadian Art ..................................................................................................... 2

Alberta as a Region .................................................................................................................. 6

Untitled, Fraser McGurk ......................................................................................................... 9

Alberta Bound Panorama, Jason Carter .................................................................................. 14

Bowfort Towers, Del Geist ..................................................................................................... 18

Conclusion ............................................................................................................................... 20

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................................................... 23

FIGURES .................................................................................................................................. 27
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Lawren Harris, *Mt. Lefroy*, 1930 ......................................................... 27

Figure 2: Fraser McGurk, *Untitled*, 2013 ................................................................. 28

Figure 3: Jason Carter, *Alberta Bound Panorama*, 2016 ........................................ 28

Figure 4: Fraser McGurk, *Bear at Vermilion Lake*, 2013 ........................................ 29

Figure 5: *Indus Elevator*, ca. 2002 ........................................................................ 30

Figure 6: Del Geist, *Bowfort Towers*, 2016 ............................................................. 31
Introduction

Within Canada, public art—here defined as either privately or publicly commissioned art placed within public spaces—has traditionally borne the weight of speaking both to a diverse population about their shared heritage as well as demonstrating the collective values of the nation to millions of visitors.¹ For example, the symbolism of the Inukshuk, an indigenous stone structure used as a location marker, might be discussed as an emblematic guide home; one could further analyze the historic development of the maple leaf motif that is embroidered onto the clothing of nearly every patriotic Canadian. Recent public art commissions within the province of Alberta, however, have actively sought the creation and communication of a regional, rather than national identity for two important reasons: in an era of economic instability of the early 2000’s, art in the public has been used as a tool to begin rebuilding confidence in the land and its ability to provide. Additionally, art has increasingly important messages of unity within diversity due to the influx of immigrants to the Alberta prairies. This thesis will argue that publicly commissioned paintings by local artists Fraser McGurk and Jason Carter have embraced a regional style and spoken both to and for the Albertan people by instituting and conveying hope for a prosperous future, reliance upon the land, and acceptance of

¹ As of 2016, more than 7 million Canadian residents had been born outside of Canada. This accounts for more than one-fifth of the country’s total population. The two largest immigrant populations in 2016 were those of Asian and African origins. See “Immigration and ethnocultural diversity: Key results from the 2016 Census,” Statistics Canada, 25 October 2017.
diversity as the public strives to find harmony in an increasingly heterogeneous population.

There has been no previous discussion about Alberta’s public art as regionalist in nature. Major academic contributions about Alberta’s art are limited to Suzanne Devonshire Baker’s 1980 collection of *Artists of Alberta*, Nancy Townshend’s 2005 *A History of Art in Alberta*, and the 2008 addition of *Alberta Art and Artists: An Overview* by Patricia Ainslie and Mary-Beth Laviolette. While the most recent publication includes contemporary art, it is already a decade outdated and public art has never been emphasized. This paper will discuss works by Fraser McGurk and Jason Carter as examples of regional Albertan art, as well as Del Geist’s *Bowfort Towers* and its lack of regionalist qualities.

**Background to Canadian Art**

Since the early twentieth century, Canadian art has been discussed as a twentieth-century phenomenon. In 1926, Frederick Housser’s *Canadian Art Movement* sung the praises of the Group of Seven, a collection of Modernist Canadian painters from Ontario who set out to capture the vast Canadian landscape. The Group of Seven emerged in the previous decade as the Canadian economy boomed through agriculture, hydro-electricity, and mining. Even prior to the creation American regional art, the Seven were seeking to paint landscapes of their home’s rural region. Many members of the Seven travelled west

---

to document the expansive prairies, the expressive skies, and the cascading Rocky Mountains. For a country that had begun as a narrow strip of land along the St. Lawrence River, the western provinces were an emblem of expansion and growth. As such, these western landscapes were an important feature to be captured in the group’s quest to paint Canada, and works by Group members, especially Lawren Harris, serve as a foundational inspiration for many of today’s regionalist artists such as McGurk and Carter (see fig. 1).

Despite the undeniable success of the Group of Seven in bringing national art to the Canadian people, some pushback did occur to the praises that Housser had emitted. In 1927, the year following publication of Housser’s book, Ernest Fosbury wrote a letter to the editor of the Ottawa Journal, addressing three incorrect myths that Housser’s Canadian Art Movement promoted about the Group of Seven:

“The Amateur Myth: the fable that the members of the group were amateurs uncontaminated by European influence... the Discovery Myth: the fable that they “discovered” that Canadian landscape was paintable... the National School of Painting Myth: the claim that these men are the first and only Canadian painters, in fact that a national school has arrived.”

Fosbury’s label of myth was well founded—Canadian art had been produced prior to the Group of Seven and continues to be produced today. Unfortunately, few have heeded his call to attain a more holistic perspective of Canadian art. The National School of Painting Myth, in particular, is foundational to household conversation about art: not

---


4 Compare the style of Lawren Harris, for example, with those of McGurk and Carter. All outline their shapes with little shading or sense of 3-dimensionality.
only was the Group of Seven the arrival of a National School, but myth would describe it as the only national school.

Housser’s myths were historically fed, too. Artistically, the Canadian west was seen as too “frontier” in these early years to warrant more than amateur artists, so the Seven’s diligence in capturing western Canada in art was among the first times that professional artists would do so. Additionally, the early country was built upon a delicate balance of the quest for independence and a deep loyalty to the crown. Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Canada’s seventh Prime Minister, was behind a movement to create a Canadian “national consciousness,” though Lamb describes that this came with an “uneasy loyalty to [the] Empire,” preventing what could be encompassed as the nation from straying too far from Ontario, where the Canadian government, and most of the population, was located. As far as artistic contributions to nation building in these late years of the 19th century, there were very few attempts to develop a focus on the Canadian land. At the turn of the twentieth century, only two formal art institutions had been formed in the country—the Art Association of Montreal in 1860, and the Art Museum of Toronto in 1900. Students of both these organizations failed to produce “a single Canadian landscape” and instead favoured “Dutch windmills, German forests, feudal castles, Venetian canals and still-lifes of fruit.”

---


7 Lamb, The Canadian Art Club, 16.
In a way, the avant-garde Canadian artists of the early twentieth century had been interested in providing art worthy to be hung with, and even replace, foreign landscapes with views of the Canadian topography. The myths built by Housser went on to explain that this was accomplished by the Group of Seven, who are acclaimed with developing the nationalistic, “Canadian style.”

This attribution is problematic, for it entirely glosses over earlier Canadian artistic advancements such as the Canadian Art Club of 1907-1915, however, it could be argued that it was not until after the First World War that Canadians found a sense of maturity and national pride. The focus art with European subject matter decreased as the Canadian economy grew through agricultural trade, hydro-electricity, and mining.

According to the myth, it was following this change that the founding members of the Group of Seven decidedly sought “distinctive symbols of Canada.”

While critics despised the new art, the myth settled in and “Canadians soon began to assume that the new movement's paintings were the country’s first and only real artistic achievement. Everything earlier tended to be forgotten.”

Not only has art prior to the Group of Seven been forgotten due to Canadian art myths, but contemporary Canadian art is unnoticed in comparison to the early modern painters. The strength of the Group of Seven as a national group has additionally made it difficult for the conversation of regional and provincial art to emerge.

---


11 Ibid, 263.
Alberta as a Region

Regionalist art in general is often thought of in terms of the American regionalist movement headed by artists such as Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton and John Steuart Curry, and the regionalist qualities of McGurk and Carter’s paintings follow many of the same principles. The American artists painted their local environments: domestic scenes in the rural Midwest. To some audiences, the paintings are read as patriotic and romantic, while to others they represent nostalgia and a sense of loss. Recent public artworks in Alberta, however, have demonstrated that the province has its own regionalism that has adapted many of the themes common to American regionalism. It is art created for a specific place and for a specific, local audience.

Like American regionalist art, which was meant to be for the people and displayed in the public sphere of post offices or the City Hall, both Fraser McGurk’s *Untitled* and Jason Carter’s *Alberta Bound Panorama* are displayed in public spaces (see figs. 2-3). They are viewed by locals and tourists alike, to whom the paintings teach of Alberta’s valued landscape and history. Despite the connection these paintings can make with foreigners, they contain many more messages for the local audience. The paintings are full of nostalgic and hopeful messages for the local viewer, such as a view of Castle Mountain in *Untitled* or pastoral scenes with grain elevators in *Alberta Bound Panorama*. Alberta’s regionalist art as created by McGurk and Carter maintains the American tradition of depicting the land as one of “idealized sustenance and plentitude,” for this is
what sustains hope and confidence in a land that is able to provide both physically and spiritually for the needs of the people.\textsuperscript{12}

Alberta is uniquely situated in a geographical setting where the prairies meet the Rocky Mountains. Along Alberta’s western border is Banff National Park, Canada’s first and most visited national park, home to Lake Louise and some of North America’s largest ski resorts. In the southern Alberta prairies, pacific air sweeping across the Rockies creates a chinook—the climatic winter phenomenon that frequently causes frigid winter temperatures to rise up to, and occasionally more than 30 degrees Celsius (a change of 55 degrees Fahrenheit) within a few hours. The badlands of southeastern Alberta are busy site of paleontological exploration, as more than 30 species of dinosaur remains have been found in the area.\textsuperscript{13} Prior to European settlement, nearly a dozen First Nation tribes inhabited the land, and by the 1880’s, Mormon settlers had claimed territory in the province’s south. Even before Alberta was incorporated as a province in 1905, it had a history rich in diverse landscapes and people.

Alberta’s history has been one of suppilation and provision for its residents. While the province had been built upon an agricultural economy, the discovery of oil near Edmonton in 1947 marked a sharp turn in Alberta’s industry. Within twenty-four years, the population had doubled. The petroleum industry initiated nearly all growth.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} Showing the land with “idealized sustenance and plenitude” had been a goal of American art. See Judith Barter, \textit{America After the Fall: Painting in the 1930s} (Chicago: The Art Institute of Chicago, 2016): 45.

\textsuperscript{13} Ian A. Campbell, "Badlands" In The Canadian Encyclopedia, Historica Canada, 1985–. Article last edited February 13, 2018.

Cities expanded; new cities emerged, and for decades, Alberta was recognized as Canada’s wealthiest province. A sharp decline, however, began in 2014. Upwards of 40,000 people, most directly related to the petroleum industry, lost jobs.\textsuperscript{15} Unemployment rates, which had traditionally been the lowest in the country, skyrocketed from 4\% to over 9\% during the month of July 2016 alone.\textsuperscript{16} That same year included a 15\% drop in exports, of which the oil and gas industry had made up 43\%.\textsuperscript{17} The Alberta recession was labeled as a depression, one of the worst in the province’s history, and affected more than the province; the Canadian dollar, which had been on par with the US dollar in 2012, fell to less than seventy cents per dollar.\textsuperscript{18} If an Albertan was not directly hurt by the recession, they knew someone who was.

In such trying times, Alberta’s public art could be used as a tool to begin rebuilding confidence in the land and its ability to provide, whether in farming, or oil, or something new altogether. Themes of the McGurk’s \textit{Untitled} and Carter’s \textit{Alberta Bound Panorama} hearken back to Alberta’s settlement and the pre-petroleum industry of agriculture. Like members of the Group of Seven who had visited the province in the 1920’s, the subject of this new public art focused on landscapes. Despite moving away


\textsuperscript{18} John Gibson, “Alberta recession one of the most severe ever, TD Economics report finds,” CBC News, last modified 19 July 2016.
from the oil industry, public art begins to explain that there are new ways to rely on the land.

It is into this context that contemporary artist Fraser McGurk creates art. The valued aspects of Alberta’s history are extracted, emerging as symbols that create a nostalgic feel for the past and an intent-driven path for a motivated future.

**Untitled, Fraser McGurk**

Fraser McGurk is one of the most prominent public artists in the small town of Canmore. Inspired by Group of Seven member Lawren Harris, McGurk’s unique process of creation involves making a whole out of many pieces. Each of his paintings is made up of dozens of carved wooden pieces, and the finished product is a combination both of painting and wood carving. McGurk begins by tracing his design onto a panel and carving out the lines between each section of colour. Each piece is individually painted before the entire work is reassembled like a puzzle. His process is symbolic of creating a whole image from many pieces, just as Alberta’s population is made up of people of diverse races, socioeconomic backgrounds, and religions.

Since 1990, McGurk has been commissioned to create business signs, personal memorials, and perhaps most notably, the three-paneled Visitor Centre sign at Banff National Park. Intended to be viewed by more than 135,000 guests each year, McGurk’s

---

19 Canmore’s busy public art scene has installed art by more than a dozen artists in the past 6 years. These include Meg Nicks, Patti Dyment and Joe Martin. Since 2014, the city has commissioned 24 murals. See “Utility Boxes,” Canmore.ca. Accessed 17 June 2018. Canmore is located an hour west of Calgary, at the mouth of the Rockies, and is only a few kilometers from the entrance to Banff National Park.
commission by Parks Canada in 2012 resulted in *Bear at Vermilion Lakes* (see fig. 4) and *Untitled* (2013). Parks Canada specified that the two panels should interpret the “natural and cultural heritage” of the park, incorporating stories of “wildlife, exploration, the Canadian Pacific Railway, and mountain landscape.” Both pieces, commissioned by Parks Canada in 2012 and installed in 2013, are rich in symbolism and fulfil the intent to “create a special space on Banff Avenue where visitors would be...inspired to take a memorable photo of their visit.”

Despite being placed in a tourist-saturated location, the “tourist” population of Banff is unique for it is primarily made up of Alberta residents. In 2015, *Tourism Alberta* reported that 84% of all tourist activities in Alberta were undertaken by Alberta residents themselves. An additional 10% of tourists were Canadians from outside of Alberta, while the remaining tourists were international travelers. As a result, McGurk’s panels, while geared to “tourists,” are still intended to help a local audience connect with their own province and its history, as the tourists themselves are Albertans.

A collage of real views and spaces, McGurk’s *Untitled* (2013) resonates with a deep symbolism of economic prosperity and draws inspiration from favoured local scenes. A black and white photograph of the mountain climber Stanley Abbott, held in

---


21 Ibid.


23 Ibid.
the collection of Banff’s Whyte Museum, is used to create the portrait of McGurk’s traveler. This traveler symbolizes each of Alberta’s residents and overlooks the iconic Castle Mountain, a distinctive local landmark to all in the area. Meanwhile, the railway mimics the view as seen from Morant’s Curve, near Lake Louise. A similar locomotive scene was released on the $10 bill, also in 2013, with the introduction of Canada’s polymer currency. The compass at the bottom left points to the north, an identification of Canada’s geographical location. Rather than just standing as familiar sights, however, the train, the traveler, and the compass all serve symbolic purposes as they connect the contemporary viewer with historic Alberta and a message of hope in the province’s economic future.

McGurk’s train can be read both as a sign of nostalgia and as a symbol for progress. The Canadian Pacific Railway extended the railroad in 1883 to what would become Alberta, although the province had not yet been established and would not be inaugurated until 1905. The railway proved to be the catalyst for the settling and exploration of the west as it brought people to Alberta. Nearly 80,000 people had settled the land when the province was created in 1905, although fewer than 20,000 had lived there prior to the railway.  

As a nostalgic icon, the steam-engine in *Untitled* does not accurately reflect the 21st-century locomotives that take travelers through the Canadian Rockies, but instead brings to memory the train engines that brought settlers to the province in the late 19th century. The train emits smoke and steam which diffuse into the sky, seeming to leave no

---

trace. The train is therefore part of nature, and *Untitled* incorporates it as a “part of the transcendental whole.”\(^{25}\) It looks back to the late nineteenth-century Albertan forefathers whose agricultural labour created a prosperous and thriving province before urbanization, when Alberta’s residents had a clearer connection with the land.

The locomotive also has a history of symbolizing progress, change, and the power of mankind.\(^{26}\) The message is particularly relevant to Alberta’s current economic status, which is transitioning away from the current economy of oil and gas. In Alberta, the train symbolizes the nostalgic change and progress that occurred more than one hundred years ago when the train brought settlers west to Alberta, and also symbolizes the change and progress today into new economic avenues. Contrasted to the farming communities of the early province, 83% of Alberta’s population now lives within urban boundaries, and the train symbolizes a renewed hope of prosperity in the west.\(^{27}\) While perhaps not on the farm, and less frequently in the oil sector, the train is a reminder that there are still opportunities that will bring new people to Alberta as the province enters into new and innovative industries.

More than a commentary on change and adventure, this painting communicates the Alberta resident’s place in the land through the traveler. Rather than standing atop the daunting mountain of the background, the traveler has only climbed a small journey.

---


\(^{26}\) Ibid, 144. Novak discusses the locomotive as the “nineteenth century’s most ruthless emblem of power,” a conversation begun by Leo Marx, an American professor at MIT.

Ahead of him is yet a strenuous climb. By this detail too has McGurk continued to the theme of progress by alluding to the journey that it was, first to build a railway across the country and then to settle the vast land, and finally to prosper, which Alberta did. The province first became a national superpower during the First World War when it provided both men and food and has since remained one of the wealthiest provinces in the country, although the recession that began in 2014 has caused residents to question the economic future of the province. Recovering from the recent recession and the attack on oil industry means that an uphill battle must be fought, and just as Alberta has begun to leave behind the recession, the traveler has begun his descent to Castle Mountain. While the Alberta man of McGurk’s painting is able to look down on the railroad, at what he has accomplished to get to where he is, there is a higher pedestal yet still, and much work to be done before the mountain is summited. This message brings peace to those worried about economies and the future of the province’s industrial and innovative role.

The compass, too, contributes to this theme of progress. A viewer can first situate his or her thoughts on where the compass is leading, for the compass points north, and Canada is north of anywhere. North will always point to home. As the early settlers carefully charted their way through the land, to reach Alberta, so must Alberta’s current leaders carefully map a plan to arrive at a prosperous destination. A plan must be deciphered and followed; success will not be achieved by accident. Knowing where to go and how to get there is part of the proactive Alberta culture that is not to be abandoned.
Alberta Bound Panorama, Jason Carter

In 2004, Albertan country singer Paul Brandt released his hit song *Alberta Bound.* The lyrics describe the artist’s journey across the state of Montana as he returned to Alberta. He recounts listening to music by Ian Tyson, another Albertan musician, upon the approach to Sweetgrass, the largest border crossing between Alberta and the United States. Paul Brandt describes the feelings associated with the re-entry to Alberta as “a pride that’s been passed down to me, deep as coal mines, wide as farmer’s fields.” Brandt’s chorus celebrates the entry into Alberta with these words:

```
I’m Alberta bound
This piece of heaven that I’ve found
Rocky Mountains and black fertile ground
Everything I need beneath that big blue sky
It doesn’t matter where I go
This place will always be my home
I’ve been Alberta bound for all my life
And I’ll be Alberta bound until I die.
```

Jason Carter’s painting *Alberta Bound Panorama* (2016) is certainly a play on these same principles as it is prominently displayed just before Canadian Border Services at the Calgary International Airport and serves better than might any words as a grand “welcome home!” It greets not only every guest as they enter the country, but more importantly, every resident as they return. It is a reminder that no matter where one goes, Alberta will always be their home, and they, like Paul Brandt, are “Alberta bound.”

---

28 This border crossing is officially called the “Sweetgrass – Coutts Border Crossing.” Sweetgrass is the Montana side of the border, and that is what is referenced in Brandt’s song.
Jason Carter, another Canmore artist, was commissioned to create forty-five paintings for the new airport terminal, which opened in 2016. In this series of paintings, Carter depicted not just mountain scenes but also represented the prairie grasslands that are home to so many of Alberta’s residents. Like McGurk, Carter’s style is similar to that of Lawren Harris, a member of the Group of Seven who was well known for his paintings of the Alberta Rockies. Each of the artists have used dark outlines between their colours and a simplified, romanticized version of landscape.

While McGurk’s *Untitled* centres around a theme of hope and success, Jason Carter’s *Alberta Bound Panorama* (2013) contains undertones of loss. The finding of oil in Leduc in 1947 began the rapid transition of Alberta’s economy from one of agriculture to one of petroleum energy, and it is the agrarian lifestyle that *Alberta Bound Panorama* celebrates. The province is known even today for its fertile land and extensive production of wheat, barley and canola.²⁹ Local beef, too, remains a source of pride for Alberta’s residents. *Alberta Bound Panorama* certainly grasps the remnants of an agricultural economy by reflecting the farming community and the reliance on the land before the oil boom, but it also memorializes iconographic prairie symbols such as the grain elevator and its place in history.

Grain elevators are one such prairie symbol and were once traditionally found in every small town along the railway line. As modern farming machinery reduced the need for the buildings, the grain elevator has become less utilitarian and more of a familiar

²⁹ Ibid.
landmark to Alberta’s people, standing as a familiar sight in their communities. In the past ten years, however, hundreds of grain elevators throughout Alberta have been demolished. Funding was not available to restore and maintain the outdated buildings, and, at the risk of becoming a safety hazard, the elevators were destroyed—often to the dismay of members of the community.

When the Indus elevator, just east of Calgary, was torn down, many families hung framed photographs of the iconic landmark in their homes as a reminder of the landmark that had signified they were “home” (see fig. 5). When driving through the prairie landscape, the elevator’s towering height had given a sense of direction, even when many kilometers away. The Indus elevator had stood beside the local elementary school and skating rink for decades, and its loss signified the loss of a cherished aspect of the community. Carter’s use of the grain elevator speaks to the longing that Alberta’s residents feel for the past imagery of comfort, and for the sights that make their home, home. The grain elevator in Alberta Bound Panorama triggers fond memories of a sense of community and the unity that arose as people mourned together for the loss of their icon. This reminiscing is essential in creating the grain elevator as an integral part of Alberta’s iconography.

Carter’s use of the grain elevator demonstrates the universal message of Alberta’s regionalist art. While speaking to a specific audience with its specific iconography, cultures across the world can connect with the elements that turn home into home. Most

30 Linda Hoang, “Community of Mundare says goodbye to last remaining grain elevator,” CTV Edmonton, 27 April 2013. See also Adrian Ewins and Robert Arnason, “At the heart of each prairie town was the grain elevator,” The Producer, 9 January 2014.

audiences can understand the importance, and subsequent loss of a valued symbol and many audiences can relate to the loss of something that represents childhood comfort or memories. In establishing Alberta’s iconography, people both local and foreign are united by these common human experiences and emotions.

Jason Carter has utilized a painting style that recreates the landscape using bold colours divided by harsh lines. The style does not lend itself to abstraction as much as evoke a state of harmony. Multiple colours and simple shapes blend together to create a familiar sight and image. The comfort of a familiar landscape, broken down into its elements, is a reminder to the viewer of the power created by diversity. Just as the regionalist art creates a whole from a variety of colours, so too do Alberta’s people become empowered through diversity. The people speak many languages. They are from many cultures and have diverse interests as a result in the influx of immigration in recent years. In 2001, only 7% of total Canadian immigrants settled in the prairies, whereas that figure was approximately 16% in 2015.32 As the distinct colours of these paintings combine to form the whole composition, so too do the distinct people of Alberta each contribute their own element to the building of the congruous provincial community.

Carter’s use of colour is not the only aspect of his work that lends to the message of many pieces creating a balanced whole. His use of narrowly spaced panels alludes to the building of a single image through many pieces, just as McGurk has done. The viewer is forced to put together that which has been deliberately separated. If one chooses to view each panel separately, they may; the full effect of the message, however, would be

---

lost. Just as the separating factors among Alberta’s citizens could be the focus of scrutiny, if required, it is powerful to train the eye to overlook the gaps and appreciate the wider vision.

The eleven vertical panels into which Carter has broken his monumental prairie landscape speak not only as a reminder to view a whole picture, but reflect the prairie provinces as seen on a map: Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba are each tall, narrow provinces that are mirrored by Carter’s vertical panels. As previously discussed, Carter’s regionalist art does little to reflect a collective Canadian identity, but certainly does serve to build the association with neighbouring prairie region. It contributes to the idea of the region that is united by its landscape and resources.

**Bowfort Towers, Del Geist**

Carter and McGurk, as Alberta residents, have successfully integrated the sights and symbols with which they have become accustomed to throughout their lives. Del Geist, the New York artist behind Calgary’s Bowfort Towers attempted a regional use of local material, though the piece has been poorly received in the year since it was unveiled (see fig. 6). Geist’s lack of connection to the land and outside perspective may be one of the reasons behind Calgary’s distaste of the piece, which neither speaks to, nor for, the local population. It does not resemble familiar styles nor does it present a new aesthetic taste.

The Bowfort Towers installation sculpture was commissioned by the City of Calgary and completed in 2017 by American artist Del Geist, whose work incorporates
geological features with public art installations. Bowfort Towers is a set of 4 metal prisms, with two pieces of Rundle rock, a local stone, cradled within each prism. Standing next to Highway 1 along the western border of Calgary, Bowfort Towers was intended to be regional in every sense. It was created to showcase a local stone and memorialize the glacial history of the region. What Geist had planned was a monument that would become an “icon of the environment.”

Despite the artist’s intentions of linking a population with their land, Calgarians had an intense negative response to the installation. The Calgary Herald published the sentiments of politicians who called for the piece to be removed. The $500,000 price tag was criticized for coming at a time when so many Albertans were losing jobs in the oil fields. A satire twitter page set up by an angry viewer promotes Bowfort Towers as the “latest piece of overpriced junk @nenshi and #yyccc have bought with your tax dollars. A cool $500k worth of scrap big enough to piss off every Calgarian.” The local indigenous population was further enraged by the out-of-context use of aboriginal burial

Del Geist has previously worked on Barum Stenning (2007), in New Devon, England. The piece does not appear to have had any response in the media, either positive or negative. Berlin Clavon Tower (1999) looks similar to Bowfort Towers but also produced little public reaction. It is unclear if the Berlin Clavon Tower was a permanent feature or if it is still there.


“Bowfort Towers,” Twitter, August 2017. Naheed Nenshi is the city’s mayor, and YYC is the city’s airport code that has been used to refer to the entire city in social media. #YYCCC refers to Calgary City Council.
marker iconography, although Geist claims he was “being advised” by local Blackfoot leaders whom he refuses to name.38

While the monument not only failed to be aesthetically pleasing, it also failed to create a meaningful connection with its intended audience. It had no sentimental value of public importance; it demonstrated neither the relationship of the people to the material nor the relationship of the people to the subject matter. Additionally, it was entirely too foreign and abstract to edify its intended audience. Overall, the sculpture does not represent the trials and joys of the local people. It speaks to neither their accomplishments nor their progress. To truly connect with the people, Alberta’s public art must attempt to understand the history, the context, from where the public has come, and it is this that Bowfort Towers has failed to do.

Conclusion

In Hilde Hein’s studies of public art, she explained that placing art in the public view does “not automatically make [it] public art” any more than “placing a tiger in a barnyard would make it a domestic animal.”39 While the previously discussed works may not have been intentionally created with the symbolism of economic prosperity, the ability to read them as such is one way in which power is given to the viewers and


39 Cher Krause Knight, Public Art, viii.
interpreters of art. It is the ability of Alberta’s contemporary art to build an iconography that unites people that empowers the people as they read, understand, and absorb the values depicted through art. These paintings truly are public art for they can speak both to the people and for the people, inspiring all to persevere and seek success in their individual pursuits. They memorialize myths of settlement and success, validate myths of diversity and acceptance, and, in the process, seek to elevate these myths to the status of truth. Public art has provided the medium to ensure such a mentality and reinforce the morals and values of such powerful thinking.

Fraser McGurk and Jason Carter have each drawn upon local imagery to create a meaningful and transcendental iconography that speaks to Alberta’s population: trains, mountains, the compass and the grain elevator all provide powerful messages of prosperity, success and belonging. While national art was the primary focus in Canada when the United States underwent its regionalist art movement in the 1930’s, Alberta now has a deep enough tradition to reflect upon in developing regional myths and traditions. Alberta’s unique regionalist art embraces diversity that can contribute to the province’s whole and values various contributions and talent. Public art has served as successful propaganda, the kind that influences the thinking, emotions, and desires of Albertans throughout the province: we have watched, viewed, and witnessed a public source telling us that my home is beautiful, safe, and able to provide a prosperous life. We have been told that our home’s history is important, and our legacy is unique.

Gene Kloss, an American regionalist artist who etched the Tiwa people of Taos, reflected at the end of her life that with each passing year, the nation was becoming more standardized and that posed a problem in the creation of regionalist art. “Now, it is just
the same everywhere,” she said.⁴⁰ Kloss’s myth-building mentality is what Alberta’s regionalism directly pushes against: we are not the same, it screams. Alberta’s heritage is unique, its success has been unmatched, and its future is unbridled so long as its people endure with the sense of ambition and determination that has been embraced throughout the province’s history.

---

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Ewins, Adrian and Robert Arnason. “At the heart of each prairie town was the grain elevator.” The Producer. 9 January 2014. https://www.producer.com/2014/01/at-the-heart-of-each-prairie-town-was-the-grain-elevator/.


Figure 1: Lawren Harris, *Mt. Lefroy*, 1930.
Figure 2: Fraser McGurk, *Untitled*, 2013. Banff Visitor Centre.

Figure 3: Jason Carter, *Alberta Bound Panorama*, 2016. Calgary International Airport.
Figure 4: Fraser McGurk, *Bear at Vermilion Lake*, 2013. Banff Visitor Centre.
Figure 5: Indus Elevator, photographer unknown, ca. 2002. Collection of the author.