



**Art Libraries Society of North America, 34th Annual Conference
Banff Spring Hotel, Banff, Alberta, Canada, May 5-9, 2006**

**Session 10: Art in the Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Photographer Mary Schäffer and the British Literati in the Canadian Rockies
Sunday May 6, 2006, 11:00 am-12:00 pm**

Moderator: Kathy Woodrell, Library of Congress

Speakers:

Dr. Colleen Skidmore, Dept. of Art and Design, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta. "Women, Wilderness and Photography: Photographer Mary Schäffer and the British Literati in the Canadian Rockies."

Lisa Christensen, formerly Curator of Art, The Whyte Museum, Banff, Alberta. "Exploring the Art of the Canadian Rockies."

Recorder: Michael May, University of Alberta Libraries, Edmonton, Alberta.

Summary:

Speakers: Dr. Colleen Skidmore, Dept. of Art and Design, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta. "Women, Wilderness and Photography: Photographer Mary Schäffer and the British Literati in the Canadian Rockies."

In 1907-1908 Mary Schäffer, photographer, writer and botanical artist from Philadelphia, and Mollie Adams, a geologist from New York, were the first non-aboriginal women to travel in the interior Rocky Mountains " ... on their own initiative, at their own expense, and for their own purposes." Schäffer's writings about her experiences in newspapers and journals, and her books, were avidly read in North America and Britain. She was greatly admired for not only the photographs, illustrations and writings themselves, but also for the discomforts that she -- a woman -- endured in order to record them.

Contrasted with Schäffer and Adams were British writers such as Mary Ward, Marion Cran and Rudyard Kipling, who traveled in greater style as guests of the railroads in exchange for their own brand of promotional adventure writing. These three all had encounters with Mary Schäffer.

Mary Ward, writer for (amongst others) the *Manchester Guardian* and author of the million-copy seller *Robert Ellesmere* (1888), spent several days with Schäffer and later received some correspondence and photographs from Schäffer following her discovery of Maligne Lake. Ward's book, *Lady Merton, Colonist* (British widow travels with brother via Canadian Pacific Railway to Canadian Rockies/meets "true love"), dealt with imperialism, colonialism, class and gender, and paralleled the reading public's interest in Schäffer. Ward claimed Schäffer as her "heroine."

Scottish writer Marion Cran (editor of *Connoisseur* and *Burlington*), came to the Rockies via Canadian Pacific and Canadian National railways to write *A Woman in Canada*, a government-commissioned book that promoted the emigration of women to Canada from Britain. She met Schäffer and wrote admiringly of her physical capabilities in the wilderness (e.g. "What can this little woman have in her so fearless that she is gaining the reputation of an intrepid explorer?").

Rudyard Kipling's first encounter with Schäffer was to be passed by Schäffer and her party on horseback, while he sat in the comforts of a horse-drawn carriage. Dr. Skidmore pointed out that late-20th century writing refers to this incident in order to elevate Schäffer's status. Dr. Skidmore noted however that it was Kipling who was by far the lesser of the two at this time and place, in terms of adventuring.

Each of them wrote of the encounter. Kipling (denigrating Schäffer's accomplishments): "... do you know any other country where two women could go out for a three months' trek and shoot in perfect comfort and safety?" Schäffer: "He was passing through a great country on a red plush seat and anyone knows that red plush ... [is] not conducive to hailing the muses to your side. I felt sorry for the part he had been forced to miss."

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle came to Jasper Park in 1914 in order to promote it on his return to Europe. He spent several days there including the Schäffer-discovered Maligne Lake. No mention was made of Schäffer in his later writings or speaking engagements.

In summary, Dr. Skidmore noted that Mary Schäffer was greatly admired by two notable female writers who traveled to the Rockies ... and "unsettled" two others. Going beyond challenging the contemporaneous notion of wilderness for men and organized touring for women, Mary Schäffer's travels, and her photographic and written record of them, "... [claimed] a place for women in wilderness—and men in tourism."

Lisa Christensen, formerly Curator of Art, The Whyte Museum, Banff, Alberta. "Exploring the Art of the Canadian Rockies."

Ms. Christensen does much hiking/backpacking, and combines it with her passion for art by searching for locations from which artists have created landscapes in the Canadian Rocky Mountains. Three books form the written record: *The Lake O'Hara art of J.E.H. MacDonald and hiker's guide* (2003), *A hiker's guide to the Rocky Mountain art of Lawren Harris* (2000), and *A hiker's guide to art of the Canadian Rockies* (1999).

During her presentation Ms. Christensen showed a large number slides from her personal collection. She began with A.Y. Jackson, who came to the Canadian Rockies in 1914. While this was before the heyday of the Group of Seven, Jackson was still well known at the time. Other artists started coming to the Rockies in significant numbers in the 1920s, when the Canadian Pacific and Canadian National Railways were competing for tourist dollars. Lawren Harris was initially disappointed with the Rockies – they didn't measure up to the pre-publicity. Harris was a Theosophist, and that is reflected in the spirituality of his artwork (he was once moved to speaking in

tongues while in the mountains). Ms. Christensen noted Harris's changing style, in which "blasted pines," which were used as focal points in his earlier paintings of the Canadian Shield in Eastern Canada and also present in his early work in the mountains, were gradually replaced by general mountain views.

Harris and A.Y. Jackson spent some time together in the Rockies, but Jackson eventually left for the more varied landscape of Waterton National Park to the south. Later in life he acknowledged that he had left the area to more accomplished artists (e.g., Harris, and Arthur Lismer).

Lisa stated that the Group of Seven artists eclipsed all others in the Rockies -- including notable but neglected female artists such as Barbara Leighton and Bess Smith. At this point Lisa referred to a book that she's always wanted to write: *Women Painters Who Will Never Be Famous Because Their Artist Husbands Were Already Famous But Who Were, In Fact, Actually Better Than Them.**

Another notable visitor to the Rockies was John Singer Sargent. Sargent was brought to Lake O'Hara by the Canadian Pacific Railway, which also supplied the artist with a large tent in which he painted, plus support staff.

Other notable artists mentioned by Lisa were T. W. Maclean, Walter Phillips (Canada's "finest printmaker"), Peter and Catharine Whyte (founders of the Whyte Museum), and J.E.H. Macdonald. The slides were endless and Ms. Christensen frequently added her expert knowledge of the outdoors when commenting on the artwork (sample paraphrases: "You can tell at what time of year this work was painted by the colour of the lake," and "This painting is of the landscape at 30 degrees below Celsius.") Lisa concluded by stating that despite the frequent visits of notable artists, ultimately it is the landscape that is the real celebrity.

* Would you like this book to be written?! ☺ E-mail michael.may@ualberta.ca and I'll collate the correspondence for Ms. Christensen.