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Review of *The Painted Valley: Artists along Alberta's Bow River, 1845-2000*, By Christopher Armstrong and H. V. Nelles

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The Painted Valley: Artists along Alberta's Bow River, 1845-2000. By Christopher Armstrong and H. V. Nelles. Calgary, AB: University of Calgary Press, 2007. xiv + 160 pp. Photographs, illustrations, color plates, notes, index. \$54.95 paper.

As books about art go, *The Painted Valley* is an unusual undertaking because neither Christopher Armstrong nor H. V. Nelles is a specialist in the field of Canadian art. Both emeritus professors at Toronto's York University, they are environmental historians who, in the process of researching a book about southern Alberta's 600-kilometer-long Bow River, "stumbled" upon a "cache of pictures" inspired by that stony ribbon of blue: paintings, photographs, and works on paper found largely in the collections of Calgary's Glenbow Museum, Banff's Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, and the Edmonton-based Alberta Foundation for the Arts.

The contents of the cache—as they discovered—were the product of a diverse group of observers categorized in the book's chapters as imperial topographers (including military artists), railway romantics (commissioned by Canadian Pacific Railway), impressionists (including the Ontario-based Group of Seven), and finally those who could actually call the river and its valley "home." In this latter group, which spans a period of over seventy years, are such early figures as Lars Haukaness, A. C. Leighton, and Walter J. Phillips to name a few, followed by the more modernist energies of Marion Nicoll, Illingworth (Buck) Kerr, and later Ted Godwin and others. In all cases, as Armstrong and Nelles assert, their representations of the Alberta river and its valley were shaped as much by certain art styles in Western art as they were by the less obvious matter of

changing cultural perceptions of nature. In a nice turn of phrase, the authors hoped to see the river through the art and instead ended up seeing art through the river (art, it should be said, that is poorly served by the quality of some of the book's color reproductions).

Nonetheless, the Bow is uniquely highlighted in *The Painted Valley* as an important muse in the development of an artistic community and, in my mind, a sense of place. Armstrong and Nelles admit to being initially astonished by the number and variety of artworks inspired by the river and its valley and wondered, within the larger story of Canadian art, how it was that "many of the images we encountered seemed unjustly neglected or overlooked." Based as they are in Toronto, this assessment is not surprising given the ongoing central Canadian bias in the country's art history. They were, in fact, "challenged . . . to rethink what we knew about Canadian art from a regional and geographically specific perspective." But all Canadian art in the landscape genre is regionally specific, and that applies even to the Group of Seven.

Given the informative research in this book, *The Painted Valley* ends then on a curiously contradictory note with its authors labeling what they call the "home-grown artists" as "second-rate," which begs the question: why then spend half a book on their efforts?

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