

Gilding the Glacier

Seven artists paint the Columbia Icefields

by Amber Bowerman

A 10,000-year-old leftover from the last Ice Age, the Columbia Icefield in Alberta's Jasper National Park is as immense as it is vital. The icefield is home to the continent's most accessible glacier, the Athabasca, and its hydrographic apex, Mount Snow Dome. Its pristine melt waters empty into the Atlantic, Pacific and Arctic oceans. In places, the ice is 1,200 feet deep—deeper than the Eiffel Tower is tall—and it can be seen from the International Space Station.

The glaciers, though quiescent and rigid to our eyes, dance in a timeless cycle of advance and retreat, a cycle that millions of people and countless ecological communities depend on for life. It is one of our most important water sources.

"Water is everything," says Calgary oil painter K. Neil Swanson. "It's the lifeblood of everything in nature." Swanson is one of a group of seven Western Canadian artists who gathered last fall for a creative summit at the Columbia Icefield. The artists were commissioned by the Canada House Gallery in Banff to create works that reflect

decisions based on better knowledge."

Sanford has committed years to the promotion of Alberta's natural heritage. In 2001, he initiated several educational projects under the umbrella of the Year of the Great Bear; last year, he was recruited by Heritage Canada to increase Canada's profile in the UN's International Year of Mountains. His successful mountain campaign saw a book festival, film festival and photography competition at the Banff Centre augment educational summits and conferences.

With the Wonder of Water, Sanford is striving to "help western Canadians understand how important water is to our culture, our unique identity, to the way that we live and the patterns of our lifestyles." He hopes to challenge us to take a closer, more thoughtful look at extraordinary places like the Columbia Icefield and the water it provides.

Swanson, too, hopes his icefield paintings will help promote interest in water. "It's amazing how little a lot of us know about the environment," says the affable young

scene over the course of a number of days. As he drank in the enormity of the Columbia Icefield from the Athabasca Glacier, his unique view of the world was awakened again. "We're all landscape artists," says Swanson of the seven artists. "Everyone could just paint a landscape. But we can do that anywhere. I put a lot of thought into what I can do to express the immensity of the [icefield]."

"It's an amazing place," agrees Cheryl Bell, spokesperson for the Canada House Gallery. "But it's not rendered that much in painting, because it wasn't until very lately that people have been on the glacier. Those were some of the last peaks to be scaled."

The first European to lay eyes on the Columbia Icefield did so in 1898, 14 years after Arthur Coleman scaled

geography. It was just a perfect combination."

Interpreting landscapes has allowed Donna Jo Massie, another Wonder of Water painter, to know the mountains as an author might come to know a character in his or her book. "Painting a landscape," says the Canmore artist, "is about knowing a place as if it were a good friend." Since immigrating from the U.S. in 1976, she has developed a deep affection for the land and the "enormous source of life" that courses through it.

Massie's landscapes are crisp and clean. Her mountains stand proud, cutting an impressive figure in the muted sky. Though she is a realist, she tries to inject her landscapes with a dusting of her own experience. "The role of the artist is to give the place life, the life they see there," she says. "It's not like seeing a photograph."



"To see the same subject through different eyes is so wonderful. It's exciting when you get people together and the art has a goal."

—Donna Jo Massie



Left: Roger Arndt, Terry McCue and Kate Pollock at the base of the icefield. Middle: Across from the snowdome. Right: On Parker Ridge.

both the enigmatic nature and the unparalleled importance of water. The Canada House Gallery will host an exhibit this May of some of the works created at the glacier retreat. The project is part of the UN-designated International Year of Fresh Water and a Canadian two-year endeavour called the Wonder of Water.

Bob Sanford, an Alberta historian, writer and self-described environmental steward, is chairing the Wonder of Water campaign. "Much of the knowledge and information people have about their water comes to them pre-politicized and biased, largely from adversarial newspaper articles," he says. "Our job here is to upgrade everyone's understanding of [water] so they can make

painter. Swanson, who was compelled to participate in the Canada House project by a fondness for the mountains and a fascination with our natural heritage, believes that art can be effective in campaigns like the Wonder of Water because, at the very least, it demonstrates that everyone sees the world around them differently. "The individual painting is a catalyst for conversation," he says. "It creates a forum, and it's a lasting forum because the painting lives on forever. People pay attention to art."

Reminiscent of the work of the Group of Seven, Swanson's unconventional mountainscapes are whimsical and bold. Often, his colourful scenes defy the laws of time, fusing day and night or showing a single forest

Castle Mountain and 15 years after the Sulphur Mountain hot springs were uncovered. When 39-year-old J. Norman Collie reached the summit of Mount Athabasca, he and his travelling companion, Herman Wooley, found themselves looking down on an ocean of ice. Collie wrote, "A new world was spread at our feet—a vast icefield—never seen by the human eye." Collie was an explorer through and through—a scientist, mountaineer, photographer and, it turns out, an avid art collector.

These days, thousands of wide-eyed visitors trek out onto the rugged surface of the Athabasca Glacier each year. Brewster Tours has constructed an interpretive centre and chalet just across Highway 93, in the shadow of the giant, turning the mysterious frozen ocean into a popular tourist destination. Brewster teamed up with Canada House last fall in their Wonder of Water project, welcoming the artists to the chalet and granting them access to the company's SnoCoaches (special buses that trundle out onto the glacier) and knowledgeable guides. "We interpret landscapes through our programs," says Lori Perlin, communications specialist for Brewster Tours. "They [Canada House] do it through art. We're both essentially interpreting Canada and its unique

Massie worked as an environmental educator for many years before her love of painting became a painting career, so she is acutely aware of the frailty of the land and the importance of the Columbia Icefield and the Athabasca Glacier. "It's significant because the icefield is sort of the origin of water," she says. "You get a sense of your place in the big scheme of things when you're out there."

Both Massie and Swanson hope their contributions to the Wonder of Water effort will help teach Albertans about the importance of the Columbia Icefield and places like it. But throughout their experience with the Wonder of Water, they were students as much as teachers, learning from each other and experiencing water through one another's eyes. "I'm sure with the Group of Seven, that's why they were a group," says Swanson. "You just learn so much more that way. When I came back from the icefield, I felt kind of isolated. I wanted to go back because it was so much fun being around all those people. I learned a lot from them." Massie agrees: "Whenever you get a group of artists working on the same project, it's always positive. To see the same subject through different eyes is so wonderful. It's exciting when you get people together and the art has a goal."

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 —K. Neil Swanson, artist



Paintings created after an artists' retreat at the Columbia Icefields. Clockwise from far left: *Sunwapta Patterns*, by Roger D. Arndt; *Athabasca Glacier*, by Peter Shostak; *Into the Light: Grizzly Bears on Snowdome Glacier*, by Page Ough; *September Larches*, by Donna Jo Massie; and *Andromeda Bears*, by K. Neil Swanson. A group exhibition marking The Wonder of Water, part of the 2003 United Nations Year of Fresh Water initiative, opens May 10 at Canada House Gallery, Banff. See www.canadahouse.com for details.

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