

A postcard from Banff

Completed in 1928, the Banff Springs Hotel is one of the most iconic landmarks in the town. Almost every local souvenir shop sells a postcard of the building. At eleven storeys high, this alpine skyscraper can be seen to embody the relationship between the built and natural environments, between infrastructure and facade, and between commodities, images and the economies that sustain their production.

The building was designed by Walter Painter, chief architect of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), and architect J.W. Orrock, who added extensions to Painter's original designs. While the structure of the building is made of reinforced concrete, it is clad in stone primarily quarried from Mount Rundle, which guests gaze upon from the hotel terrace.

The Banff Springs Hotel was one of a number of hotels built to develop tourism in the Rockies, in part to service the debt accrued from the construction of the nation-building CPR, the cost of which could not be supported by the transport of coal, timber and other freight alone. Soon after the development of the railway in the late nineteenth century, art was used to promote the region as a viable tourist destination. The CPR encouraged artists to produce imagery that would sell the landscape to potential tourists. It offered willing artists free rail travel, studios and accommodation – a type of artist's residency long before the Banff Centre. Many of the paintings produced incorporated the railway infrastructure into the visual language of the European landscape tradition; these images were largely aimed at attracting European visitors.

While the numerous postcards available in the town today may be examples of a cultural form in declining use, an online image search quickly reveals a multitude of amateur snapshots of the building that have an even greater global reach. CPR President Cornelius van Horne is frequently quoted as having said that, 'If we can't export the scenery, we'll import the tourists'; it is the very circulation of images of the scenery that continues to attract tourists.

In the 1900 guide book *Canadian Mountain Rockies* Betty Thornley wrote: 'When that great "thrust from the Pacific" that the geologists talk about crumpled the Rocky Mountains up from the nethermost deeps ... the first step was taken in making Canada the natural summer playground of North America.' Ignoring all other human settlement in the intervening millennia she identified the building of the CPR as the second step and the creation of the National Park as the third.

Language is frequently used to render historical events as natural occurrences. Not only is the Banff Springs Hotel's Scottish baronial style a hybridised import from another place, but Banff's very name is an echo of another settlement – a fishing port in the north east of Scotland (the CPR's first president George Stephen hailed from Banffshire). When placed on the map of Canada, the name erases previous histories. Banff's unexpected Scottish heritage continues to be performed at the Banff Springs Hotel, where kilted staff members greet guests – just as guides in 'Swiss' attire greet visitors to the nearby hotel, Chateau Lake Louise.

Though the railway no longer provides the means of access for most visitors to Banff, the commercial and architectural structures that the CPR put in place inform the dialogue between nature, commerce and industry in Banff today. Images of nature are frequently used as screens: photographs of trees mask construction sites and vacant retail premises, and images of wild animals cover the town's buses.

As the story of the Banff Springs Hotel demonstrates, the history of Banff – like that of Liverpool – is closely tied to the development of infrastructure that supports the movement of people and goods. From the CPR's support of artists, to the foundation of the Banff Centre, to the evolution of the Liverpool Biennial, art and the associated circulation of images has often played a part in the development of infrastructure that supports the movement of people and goods – validating and questioning the power of representation, colonisation and industrialisation.

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