

# **Survey Art – An Interesting Subject**

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## **SUMMARY**

Believe it or not surveyors lead interesting lives and their work makes an interesting subject for artwork. One of the most astounding pieces of survey art was born right here in Cairo in the tomb of Mena at Sheikh Abd el Qurna, in Thebes, Upper Egypt.

Over the past thirty years the Alberta Land Surveyors Association has commissioned a number of pieces of art and collected several reprints from other collections. Each tells an interesting story. The paper will discuss the general topic of survey art and relate the stories behind several specific works.

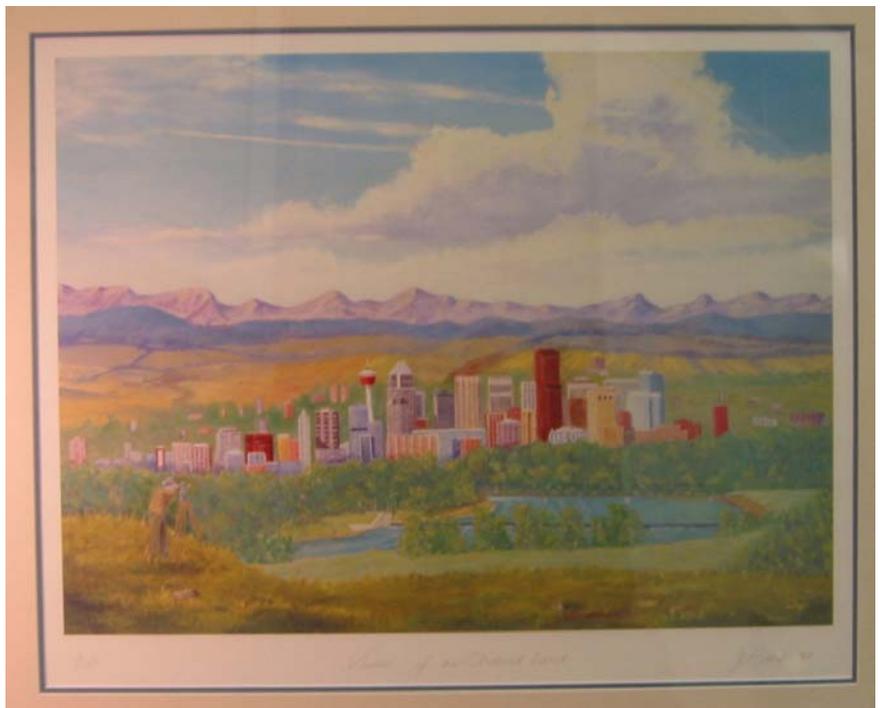
# Survey Art – An Interesting Subject

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## 1. SURVEY ART AND FIG

In 1994, Survey Art was added as an item for discussion in Commission 1 – Professional Practice stimulated by a paper by Thomas Glatthard of Switzerland. At that point in time survey history was dealt with as a sub-topic in Commission 1. The History of Surveying later became a special ad hoc Commission and then a Permanent Institution of FIG. Survey art was a term of reference of Commission 1 until 1996 when it was transferred to the ad hoc commission on the History of Surveying.

In 1995, at the Working Week in Berlin, the chair of Commission 1 presented a painting to FIG President, Earl James. The painting entitled Vision of an Ordered Land portrayed the City of Calgary, in Alberta, Canada on the centennial of its incorporation as a city. The watercolour envisioned in the eyes of a surveyor doing the original surveys setting out the city in 1897. The painting was done by a land surveyor, cum artist from Calgary.



The following year, in Buenos Aires, another painting was presented to new president Peter Dale, continuing the interest in survey art. This painting was an historical painting depicting a survey in the Australian outback. At the Buenos Aires meeting a papyrus was presented informally to the chair of Commission 1 from the Egyptian delegation. The papyrus was prepared as a result of a discussion held a year earlier whereby the chair of Commission 1 had quizzed the Egyptian contingent about the existence of the mural commonly referred to as the Rope Stretchers. This magnificent piece of art is now displayed prominently in my home.



In 1998 at the XXI Congress in Brighton, UK, the ad hoc Commission organized a five day exhibition on the Art & History of Surveying. The Rope Stretchers had a prominent role in that exhibition as part of 43 different panels featuring reproductions of survey art from around the world. A CD was published as a record of the exhibition. A one day forum on the History of Surveying was also held in conjunction with the exhibition.

## 2. THE ALBERTA LAND SURVEYORS' ASSOCIATION COLLECTION

The Alberta Land Surveyors' Association has a collection of several dozens pieces of survey art. The collection began in 1967 during Canada's centennial year, as a tribute to C. H. Snell - a life member who had kindly made a major financial contribution to a local library.

In recognition of his contribution both to the library and to the surveying profession, the association commissioned a portrait of Snell in a field scene and donated it to the library. Over the years the association, in conjunction with other groups commissioned other works of art with a survey connection. They also acquired prints of art prepared by other organizations or individuals. The painting *Vision of an Ordered Land* mentioned earlier was also a project sponsored by the Association.



## 3. THE ROLE OF SURVEY ART IN PRESERVING HISTORICAL EVENTS

Prior to the invention of photography, the artist played an important role in preserving historical events. As they say – *A picture is worth a thousand words!* That certainly is true with art – you get the visual effect of what the artist actually sees plus artists are able to capture some of the outlying objects that would not normally fit into the frame of a photograph.

The field notes prepared by many early surveyors often show many interesting observations of survey life in their field books, often capturing that little bit of extra detail that may be pertinent many years later. It is a bit of a shame that with all of our modern technology that we don't take the time to put some of our thoughts in a more creative and artistic format. This unique survey art needs to be captured and preserved for the enlightenment of future generations and for the simple need to ensure that the historical value is not lost.

The interesting thing about history is that very often it is not surveyors that want to commemorate historical events but the general public – in particular historical societies.



In 2003, the Windermere Historical Foundation commissioned a 5 metre bronze sculpture of David Thompson, an early Canadian surveyor, explorer and fur trader. Thompson was an historic surveyor who charted most of western Canada and parts of the northwestern United States during the early seventeenth century. Thompson had built a fort near the location of the modern town of Invermere. The Alberta Land Surveyors' Association together with several other Canadian and

American survey organizations participated in funding this major undertaking which stands as a monument to a pioneer of our profession.

Another rather unique depiction of survey art is found as a stained glass window entitled "Exploration" which is in the Christ Church Cathedral in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. It's not often that pictures of surveyors are preserved in stained glass let alone in a church setting! But once again it shows the value of art in defining important historical events in some of the most unique places.

One of my favorite pieces is a watercolour that I had considerable involvement in commissioning. The picture depicts the bust of perhaps the most famous rebel in Canadian history – Louis Riel. The scene depicts Riel and his Métis colleagues stepping on a surveyor's chain. This incident took place in 1869 in Manitoba at the commencement of the Dominion Land Survey, which was destined to survey over two million square kilometres of prairie land into rectangular sections for homesteading. At the top of the painting is the Métis leaders moccasin stepping on the Gunter's chain. In the background is the Métis style river lot system flanked by the square sections of the Dominion Land Survey.

This incident was sparked by the fear of the Métis people that the government had commissioned the surveyors to take away the Métis lands. This event had considerable



significance in the history of settlement geography of Western Canada in that the original design of the survey system called for 800 acre sections. After the Riel incident and the brief rebellion that ensued, the Surveyor General had the system redesigned to create 640 acre sections which resulted in the layout of all of Western Canada being changed significantly adding an additional 25% more parcels of land for homesteading.

#### **4. SURVEY ART AS A MARKETING DEVICE**

By participating in the preparation of artworks with a survey connection, surveyors and survey organizations can gain favourable publicity for the surveying profession in a subtle, unobtrusive manner. The depiction of surveyors and their roles in society in an artistic medium also assists in the preservation of local history and the education of the general public on the important role that surveyors play in society.

During the 2002 annual general meeting of the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association, the organizing committee arranged for a display of survey art as part of the convention activities. We were also fortunate to have Global TV News do an onsite newscast for two hours one morning and they did an interview with one of the artists in the art exhibit. This kind of publicity is an invaluable means of educating the public about the role of the surveying profession.

Art comes in many forms – printed art, cartoons, sculptures, jewelry, quilting, weaving, pottery, etc. - all forms that can be used to depict surveying scenes. It is a medium that everyone can dabble in as an amateur and some interesting scenes can be created. An associate created the novelty scene at the right with some very basic materials such as lathe, a mailing tube and a few fence posts. Another colleague created a fence display to show the relationship of survey monuments to common occupational limits.



## 5. CONCLUSION

As a profession we need to preserve our past in order to preserve our future. There are many fine examples of the role surveyors have played in society going back several millennia. People enjoy and relate to artistic media to learn and appreciate historical events. Many surveyors are also talented artists and should be encouraged to channel some of that talent to artistic endeavors. With limited resources and a keen imagination we can often create unique works that will preserve our exciting past and at the same time market our profession for the interest and enjoyment of the public.

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL**

The Alberta Land Surveyors' Association (ALSA), established in 1910, is a self-governing professional association legislated under the Land Surveyors Act of Alberta, Canada. The Association regulates the practice of land surveying for the protection of the public and administration of the profession.

G. K. (Ken) Allred is a past president of the Alberta Land Surveyors' Association. He is also Vice President of FIG. He was chair of Commission 1 - Professional Practice from 1994-98.

## **CONTACTS**

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