

Abstract

This research analyzes the impact of artists Sydney Laurence (1856- 1940), Belmore Browne (1880- 1954), and Olaus Murie (1889- 1963) and the contribution that their artwork had to the conservation of United States public lands. This thesis examines the conservation initiatives that were brought into effect during the early 1900s, the personal motivations of these artists to preserve the land, and the interactions between these artists and the United States government which demonstrates their involvement in land preservation. The impact that the artists had on tourism which extended the conservation movement is also addressed. Artworks created by Laurence, Browne, and Murie are examined and evaluated for their aesthetic impact and their contribution to environmental, geographical, and biological knowledge of the habitats and wildlife that were largely unknown to the United States government. The analysis of governmental documents and legislation, the lobbying efforts of activist organizations, and government official's reception of the artwork of Laurence, Browne, and Murie which is presented in this thesis proves the impact of these artists. The paintings of Sydney Laurence and the paintings and field sketches of Belmore Browne and Olaus Murie aided in the preservation of millions of acres of land in the Northwest region of the United States.

The research presented here is important in that it credits the artistic contributions of these artists in the context of the American conservation movement and adds to the available scholarship on Sydney Laurence, who is largely unknown outside of Alaska.

Research

Over the course of this research endeavor, I conducted on site and virtual research at many archives. On site research took place in Jackson, Wyoming at The Murie Center, The National Elk Refuge, The National Museum of Wildlife Art, and Grand Teton National Park.

I was able to utilize the digital archives of the following institutions for further research: The American Heritage Center, The Dartmouth College Rauner Special Collection Library Archives, The Denver Public Library Western History Collection, The US Fish and Wildlife Service Archives, and the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

Interviews were conducted with Dan McIlhenny, docent at The Murie Center; George Schaller, a biologist that accompanied Murie on his expedition to the Brooks Range in Alaska; and Kesler Woodward, art historian and scholar of Sydney Laurence.

Points of Interest

- Sydney Laurence sold one of his paintings to President Harding when the president was on a trip to Alaska and stopped by Laurence's Studio.
- Laurence's painting *Top of the Continent*, which depicts Mt. McKinley, hung in the governmental buildings in DC for decades.

- With Charles Sheldon, Belmore Browne drafted the Act to Establish Mt. McKinley National Park in 1915.
- Browne spoke in front of congress at The Hearing to Establish Mt. McKinley National Park in 1916.
- Browne was such an important figure in the establishment of the national park that the 10th tallest mountain peak in Mt. McKinley National Park was named “Browne Tower” in his honor.
- Olaus Murie’s research and drawings of the wapiti elk population at the National Elk Refuge resulted in the adding thousands of acres of land to the refuge’s protection.
- Olaus Murie helped to found The Wilderness Society and became the club’s president.
- In 1954, Murie and other researchers explored the Brooks Range in Alaska. Murie drew the landscape and the animals as a means of documentation, which aided establishment of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, which preserved millions of acres of land in the Brooks Range.
- During his time as president, he defined “wilderness” and drafted The Wilderness Act, which would protect designated areas of wilderness. The act that he drafted was passed one year after his death.

Sydney Laurence (1856-1940)

Sydney Laurence played a significant role in depicting Alaska as the “Last Frontier.” During his life, Laurence created paintings that featured Alaskan landscapes which would influence the perception of scenes that were quintessentially Alaskan. Laurence’s paintings of Mt. McKinley, which would become the namesake of Mt. McKinley National Park, later renamed Denali National Park, created a sense of sublime wonder and mystery that circulated across the nation, bringing with it travelers to Alaska, which led to a greater interest in preserving the Alaskan landscape. Laurence’s painting *Off to the Potlatch* (1922) was used in travel brochures to influence visitors to travel to Alaska.

His Artwork, Mt. McKinley 1913 is particularly representative of Laurence’s painting style, featuring a romanticized and iconic view of Mt. McKinley in Alaska.



Sydney Laurence, *Off to the Potlatch*, 1922, Oil on Canvas, travel brochure reproduction from the Northern Pacific Railroad, 1931



Sydney Laurence, *Mt. McKinley*, 1913, 1913, Oil on Canvas, Anchorage Museum of History and Art, Gift of Anchorage Museum Association and Friends of the Anchorage Museum

Belmore Browne (1880-1954)

Belmore Browne is a significant figure in his role in the establishment of Mt. McKinley National Park and in his utilization of artistic practices. His art created the impetus with which he fought for the national park and helped to establish a visual identity for the northwest region. He is known for his wide array of talents, including being a painter, biologist, conservationist, and climber. These skills served to add to the influence that Browne had in legislative hearings regarding the national park, as it distinguished him as a man who was intimately familiar with the land in all facets.

Most important to his efforts to persuade the government to preserve Alaskan land areas were his paintings of Alaskan landscapes and sketches of its wildlife— both of which had not yet been seen by the settler colonists of the United States.



Figure #: Belmore Browne, *Untitled Deer Sketch*, n.d., 9" x 13", Courtesy Dartmouth Library Archives



Belmore Browne, *The Chief's Canoe*, 1926, 35 in. x 47 in., Image Courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of Henry Ward Ranger through the National Academy of Design

Olaus Murie (1889-1963)

Olaus Murie greatly influenced the protection of land in Wyoming, Montana, and Alaska, and influenced the designation of wilderness as protected public lands through his career as a field biologist and through his artistic contributions. The practice of drawing during field expeditions was instrumental in Murie's intimate connection to the land and allowed for others to experience

the wildlife and landscape of the region. His scientific drawings led to a greater understanding of the wildlife populations by governmental agencies and led to the protection of land. Throughout his life, his work influenced the United States government to pass legislation and establish wilderness areas that protected upwards of 19 million acres in the Northwestern United States via the Wilderness Act, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and the National Elk Refuge.



Sketches of the Wapiti from many Views, Olaus Murie. Pencil on Paper, n.d., Images courtesy of the National Museum of Wildlife Art Archives



Olaus Murie. *Coyote in the Aspens*, 1950, Oil on Canvas, 26" x 32", Gift of Florence Lamb, National Museum of Wildlife Art