

# Symbolism and Iconography in the Art and Architecture of the Canadian Prairie

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## INTRODUCTION

With the emergent development of agriculture in western Canada during the latter 19th and early 20th centuries, grain elevators were situated in the new towns then being laid out and settled along an expanding network of rail lines. The elevators, built as an integral part of the town, were the economic life blood and visual anchor of the prairie communities. The reciprocity of land, town and community symbolized by the grain towers formed a unique imagery in the eyes of the townspeople that came to be expressed in the local art.

Mergers of the farm cooperatives, largely over the past decade, has shifted the collection and ensiling of the grain away from the rural communities to regional centers. Many clusters of the utilitarian yet beautiful wooden towers have been partially or entirely demolished. Not only has their destruction left the towns bereft of a powerful landmark, but also the source of the town's livelihood has been removed. Today, often only what remains of a harmonious past is reflected in three local forms of graphic and artistic expression: town buttons, miniature emblems of the local community; the large company logos on the sides of the existing grain towers, superimposed over time one on another; and mural art, encompassing both advertisements and figurative painting.

The paper briefly reviews the forces which shaped the prairie towns and looks at the union of the grain towers with the visual landscape of the community. It then discusses the forms of local art, which, naively but poignantly, captures the essence of the prairie yesterday through the imagery of a life symbolized by the grain elevator. This art tells the story of an everyday way of life which has past, at once idealizing that past and communicating it to future generations. In this it is perhaps not different than the cave paintings of the European stone age, or the exquisite wall paintings of Pompeii.

## BACKGROUND: TOWN AND TOWERS

The survey adopted by the Canadian Order-in-Council in 1871 sectioned the prairie provinces into township Squares of six by six miles. Each township was further divided into Subdivisions of one square mile, forming the basic town unit. The grid was universal, characteristically ignoring the topography and natural features of the landscape. Strongly imprinted on the land in the rectangular grid of fields and roads, the grid was, and is to this day, the organizing force of the prairie.

The railroads traverse the landscape either parallel to the Survey grid, or at a diagonal to it. In turn, the street grid of the towns either follows the line of the Survey grid or is at an angle to the grid, following the diagonal of a rail line.

The role of the grain elevator complexes and their visual impact upon the townscape is shaped by the conjunction of the railroad line and street grid, specifically the relationship between the main street of the town and railroad avenue where the elevators are situated. The individual plans of the prairie town follow one of three primary typological patterns:

1. The main street of the town flanks the railroad. The grain towers are situated on the far side or town side of the tracks. The commercial buildings of the town are arrayed along the length of the main street with their frontage facing the tracks.

2. The main commercial street—main street—of the town is perpendicular to railroad avenue paralleling the tracks. The complex of grain elevators is situated at the head of the tee intersection of the two streets, either on the far side or town side of the tracks. Businesses line both sides of the main street, framing the vista toward the grain towers, which are seen head-on.

3. The main street of the town lies parallel to the railroad avenue, but at a distance removed by one or two blocks. The perpendicular side streets, which cross the main street and terminate at railway avenue, are predominately residential. The towers can be seen from main street over the facades of the low commercial buildings.

Within each town there are groups of towers belonging to a single or more than one company. The particular massing of each tower and its annexes, its height and individual color combined with the sign of the company define each group and groups within the cluster.

Verticality, the stepped slopes of the top, detailing of the wood cladding and flare of the base skirt to shed water away from foundation, define the form of the grain elevator. The overlay of color is used to identify the individual grain company, contributing an unique dimension to the presence of the towers in town and on the prairie landscape. Today seven colors are observed among contemporary grain companies. The *Pioneer* paints their elevators red with yellow roofs and white lettering on the walls. The *Alberta Wheat Pool* uses pale green for the walls and black and white for the large company logo. The *Saskatchewan Wheat Pool* elevators are white or gray. Vivid green represents *Cargill*. The *United Grain Growers* of Alberta paints the elevators white with a blue sign. Pale yellow is used often by Parish & Heinbecker with its characteristic logo of P & H painted in brown on a white field and outlined. Brown-wine, seen on elevators in some locations, was earlier used as the color of *National*, as well as by the *Federal*, an older group of growers.

## AN IMAGERY AND LOCAL ART

### The symbolic, the realistic and the naïve

In the Western Canadian prairie town one encounters various forms of artistic expression which can be classified in three distinct forms:

Town buttons are the contemporary “coat of arms” of the prairie town. In this group, the symbols of the region or town itself are displayed graphically and in color to quickly establish the image of town.

The second group comprises large scale signs and logos, painted on the wooden elevator walls. Their graphic effect is in a sense accidental, the sign is superimposed over previous occupant's color and logo by a new company purchasing the group. Their richness derives from the number of users over time of the tower.

The third group, mural art, occupies walls of buildings, and adorns the entrances to commerce. As such it can take a form of advertisement or a figurative mural painting. While the advertisement carries a direct message recommending specific product or place, the painting usually depicts prairie life, using familiar to prairie inhabitants iconography to convey the mood, depict an action and define a symbol. The railroad, grain towers, buildings of the main street, familiar tools of farm life, people and animals all play a part. The way those elements are assembled and represented on paintings creates the richness of this type of art.

### TOWN BUTTONS

The emblems of the prairie life are richly represented on local miniature town buttons. They vary in shape — circles, squares, elevator towers, trapezoids in a form of an oil rig, semicircles as well as more complicated shapes. The colors of button backgrounds and that of the images placed on it are usually bright. The subjects depicted vary from elevator towers and oil rigs, to people, animals and vegetables, emblematic, in the eyes of the citizen, of what represents the town. Every town visited had one, sometimes two of these little symbols.

As an example the town of Halkirk is represented by the circular button with the white field divided in four quadrants, each occupied by the symbol: red elevator, a black and white cow, an oil rig and a mobile crane—all joined by the rose, the symbol of Alberta. On the Balcares button, the “Balcares, Pride of the Prairie” sign is placed in the blue circle which enfolds a white elevator tower with yellow roofs. “Taber Land of the L- o- ong Sun” is represented by a white carrot displayed in the yellow field. The town of Springside shows a black trapezoid representing an oil rig, is surrounded by the three wheat bouquets.



Fig. 1. Town Buttons, Alberta and Saskatchewan

### GRAIN ELEVATOR SIGNAGE

Not all images painted on the elevators are deliberate examples of graphic art. An accidental graphic effect occurs when a new owner takes over an existing tower cluster. Rather than repaint the entire tower, the new owner selects a section of wall to bear his logo and signal the changed ownership. Usually the new logos are larger than the traditional elevator signage and the overall appearance of the overlaid signage differs in color, size and age. Depending on number of grain tower owners who have superimposed one sign upon the other without entirely repainting the predecessor's wall, graphic richness and complexity is created, with the signs taking on the quality of modern super-graphics.

In Veregin, Saskatchewan the elevator group, which was painted originally in white — the color representing Saskatchewan Wheat Growers, was purchased by the Pioneer, whose color is red. The new company, instead of repainting the entire wall, placed a red PIONEER sign in yellow field on it and marked in red the wall elements—a spout, a door and the protruding addition in the upper reaches of the elevator. Of the three elevator annexes, one was left white with black PIONEER sign and the yellow roof was painted on it. The other two, possibly newer additions were red, one with yellow roof.

The whole group formed an evocative advertisement for the PIONEER, more so if the whole complex had been painted the pioneer red. That wall of colorful graphic display brought lots of fun and a unique presence to town life.

Similar method of marking the group of elevators was observed in Eastend, Saskatchewan. Farmer's Pool maroon POOL sign in yellow field holds as own the white elevator wall of its previous owner, while the roof and vents of the building are painted a new owner's color, maroon or yellow.

In Dybart's group the Pioneer ownership changed by acquisition to Saskatchewan Pool. The resulting signage contrasts between dark red and white in parts of wall and lettering.

An interesting graphic display was the result of multiple elevator group ownership in Speers, Saskatchewan. The main elevator wall bears the signs of being repainted from burgundy to vivid green and the dark red by its previous owners. The elevator signage followed same order. The paint, which now is peeled and faded, betrays the markings of ownership by Pool, National and possibly some other user, not recognizable after the years of fading. This wall is an excellent example how rich this form of art, created on the prairie, can be.

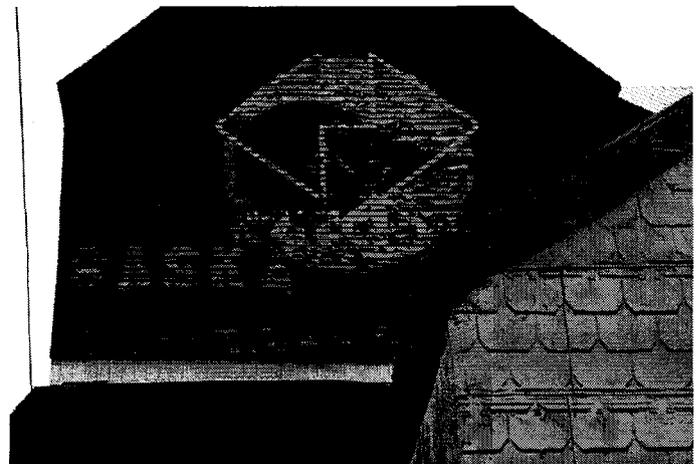


Fig. 2. Elevator group signage. Speers, Saskatchewan. Photo 1999

Of all forms of art, the accidental elevator signage is the most vulnerable to demolition and change—vanishes all together with the demise of the elevators. Some of the signs discussed here have been already destroyed.

**MURAL ART: ADVERTISEMENT AND FIGURATIVE PAINTING.**

Billboard-like advertisements precede the figurative wall art. While ornamental as much as advertisement, they describe a company product rather than the character of a locality and way of life on the prairie.

Figurative mural art can be divided in two categories; the “naïve” art painted by local, largely untrained, artists or school groups, and those which were commissioned by town organizations or a private citizen.

**WALL ADVERTISEMENTS**

The 1900’s, 1920’s and 1940’s advertisement belongs to the era in which it was created and stands out of the specific character of the locality where it is displayed. The advertisement is largely a graphic display of words. Figurative depiction is rarer and associated with the advertising symbol, for example a large figure of the full grown male deer, STAG — name of the tobacco brand.

This is illustrated by a Stag advertisement, painted on the upper reaches of the main street building (side wall) in Swift Current, and on the building facing the railroad avenue in a small community of Botha, Saskatchewan. “Everybody smokes tobacco” shares place with a large white STAG sign in the green oval field while realistically painted brownish, auburn figure of the resplendent deer stands by. The Swift Current wall must be a previous home of another advertisement- the word CHUM appears from underneath the tobacco sign, adding to the graphic effect of the overall appearance. Other examples of advertisement celebrate the familiar logos of Coca-Cola or businesses, which are primarily local.



Fig. 3: Stag Tobacco sign. Swift Current, Saskatchewan. Photo 2000

The bold scale and graphics of these ads are highly visible after the years of weathering. Prairie towns characteristically are sparsely built, the buildings and their side walls can be seen from across the town. The advertisement became an integral part of the townscape, bright colors juxtaposed with the single buildings and plain materials of the town itself.

**FIGURATIVE PAINTING**

**Naïve art**

The painted figurative mural art can be divided in two groups: naïve art and commemorative art. The naïve art is often anonymous, painted by the local largely untrained artists or school groups under the direction of an art teacher, commemorative art is usually commissioned by individuals and town organizations and painted by professional artist for a fee.

Naïve art is characteristically more evocative in its expression and in many ways a more accurate picture of a particular locality. Often painted by the layman, at first glance the art appears to be intensely realistic. The objects inhabiting the murals are drawn with great degree

of descriptive detail. People, if they are illustrated, are rendered performing the familiar tasks of everyday life of the prairie: cultivation of the fields, harvesting of grain, or participation in the activities of town life. Further scrutiny, however, uncovers symbolism, idealism and even abstraction. The symbolism is translated to the viewer with the help of familiar figures or objects, connected with the locality or with the character of the community and its way of life. Idealism, which often supports the symbolic representation, is intensified by naivete in depicting the scene. The abstraction in pictorial representation is seen in the way subjects and metaphors come together to depict the intended mood or establish a symbol.

The scene on a mural in Shaunavon, Saskatchewan depicts a western prairie town set against the backdrop of distant mountains. A country road meanders through the landscape, overlooking a lake. A large bird placed at the center of composition soars vividly in the blue of the sky. In the foreground there is a trio of forms: a fortress-like object, a deer, and an oil tower. The composition is dominated by two grain elevators, painted red and white, set apart and juxtaposed against the sky and background buildings which appear to be houses in the town situated at some distance from the towers. The mural occupies the wall of a one story building 65 to 70 feet in length.



Fig. 4. Shaunavon, Saskatchewan. Local Mural. Photo 2000

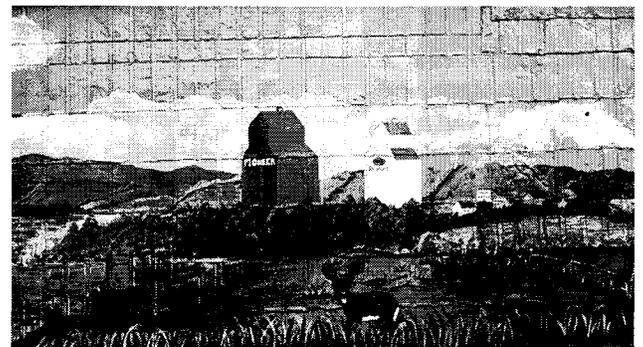


Fig. 5. Shaunavon, Saskatchewan. Local Mural detail. Photo 2000

Shaunavon is located in the southwest part of the Saskatchewan province. Dry, grassy plains surround the town; there are no mountains in the vicinity, even the presence of water is scarce. What then does the painting represent? For town inhabitants this is not a question; for them the mural is creating a picture of idyllic country life. How is this symbolic message represented in the painting? The large bird, which is possibly an eagle, can be understood as a symbol of freedom, its importance is underlined by its placement together with the grain towers as the most prominent figures in the overall iconography of the painting. The elevators signify prairie life. The trio of foreground objects, the fortress, deer and oil tower take a meaning by establishing a link between the past, present and future.

The mural was painted by June’s art class, a group of 16 students varying in age from 5 to 80. The popularity of the painting was such that other buildings in town asked for a similar collaborative effort on the part of the artists.

Symbolism is also strong in a less stylized depiction of the prairie life in a mural observed in Delbourne, Alberta. The mural tells the story of the prairie settlement. Land, reclaimed from the forest, is rendered prominently in the background of the painting. The steam locomotive of a train occupies the foreground of the mural. The Main Street of the town, with its omnipresent hotel, is located to the far left of the scene, town dwellings to the right, and the grain elevators left of center and behind the railroad line. Five medallions are prominently placed in the composition: the head of an Indian and that of a woman, a man in a hat, a man with a miners lamp, and a oil lantern. Possibly the mural represents the first settlers of the area. The painting is somber—there are no bright colors to attract the eye and lighten the mood. The sky has a northern feeling, its all gray with small white clouds. The forest is brushed with white as if depicting morning frost. The scene seems to speak of life hardships in the northern latitudes and the difficulties of reclaiming land for cultivation. The viewer senses an intense, evocative loneliness emanating from the painting.

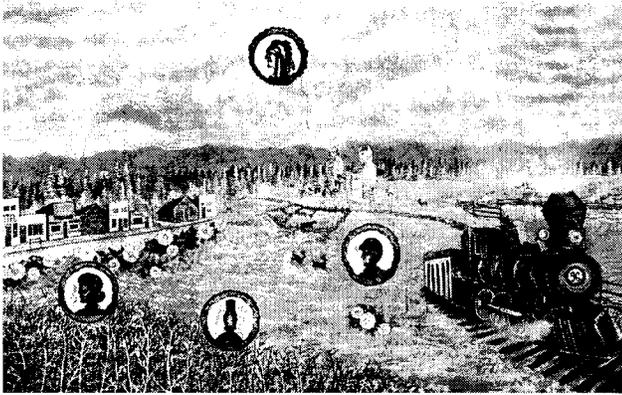


Fig. 6. Delbourne, Alberta. Local Mural. Photo 2000

Lomond in Alberta is a small town. Few buildings exist and they face four groups of elevator towers standing on the opposite side of the Railway Avenue. A large mural occupies the side wall of a business situated at a corner intersection with the Avenue. The scene depicts the annual harvest set against a background of rolling fields, farm animals, roof tops of houses, and grain towers. In the foreground of the painting boldly drawn figures, mostly men and one women, are reaping and baling hay. All the men with one exception are wearing some form of headgear: a brimmed hat, beret, or visored cap. The stylistic conventions seen in the painting are similar to those of the social realism of the 1940's and 50's used to celebrate the moral strength of the working class. The scene in Lomond imparts the same idealistic sense of communal well-being achieved through the harmony of working together. The euphoria is translated through the dynamism of the activity and the uplifting mood of the participants. The headgear embodies a message of unity with people of different occupations joining hands in the harvest for the common good.



Fig. 7. Lomond, Alberta. Local Mural. Photo 1999

## FIGURATIVE ART

### Commissioned and commemorative art

In some localities, especially in the recent years, commissioned art by professional artists has proliferated. According to Ms. Janet Nash of Quil in High River, Alberta, the Canadian Government in 1990 gave prairie towns three dollars per each inhabitant to sponsor an imaginative program helping to bring tourism and with it income to the prairie towns. High River responded by establishing an art commission whose action lead to painting large murals, which commemorated important town events on existing vacant building walls. The murals feature various scenes: "Log Jam in the Highwood" by Holmes, an "Aviation" and "Harvest" murals by Driediger", Old Woman Buffalo Jump" by Jones among them.

The town of Moose Jaw in Saskatchewan features close to twenty large murals, which commemorate important town icons and events. The romance of flight, an infatuation quite common in the 1920's is represented together with early settlers, brave fireman, evocative news, parades, summer games, trains, famous store interiors and even tropical beach scenes. The murals are the work of known Canadian artists: Gus and Rob Froese, Dan Sawatzky, Denny Yornisson, Grant McLaughlin, Brian Volke and others.

Among all murals one painting in Moose Jaw especially attracts attention for its symbolic message and artistic representation. The mural had no name, lets call it "Working the Earth" painted by Paul Geraghty of Avonlea in 1990. The painting shows a span of four oxen with a farmer riding a plow at dawn. Darkly rendered animals placed in the luminous sky, working the earth are centered in the mural. The pictorial power of oxen is counterbalanced by the dominance of the sky. They move slowly down the earth slope, its pitch introducing an important diagonal, which balances the composition — the deep ridges of turned earth cast a shadow. The farmer holds the reins to restrain the animals, putting all his effort into this action. The whole group pulls towards the brightness of the sky with the sun rising behind them.

The subject and composition remind especially one of the works of Slavic painters rendering rural scenes at the turn of the century — an oil painting named "Earth", executed in 1898 by the Polish painter Ferdynand Ruszczyk. The painting depicts two large oxen working the curvature of the sloping earth against powerful, blue with clouds, sky. Similarities of Geraghty work can be traced with the works of another Polish painter Leon Wyczolkowski and his work "Plowing the earth in Ukraine" painted in 1892. There the detail of the oxen's heads and rendering of the ridges of earth is more prominent. The light permeating the painting, possibly also a dawn light is rendered with yellowish modeling. The subject of life as it relates to nature, was one of the most popular with the impressionistic painters in the turn of the century.



Fig. 8. "Working the Earth", Paul Geraghty, 1990. Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Photo 2000

The "Prairie Cattle Drive" by Pugeaux painted in 1994, merits attention for painterly quality and detail. The distant mountains provide the background to the cattle drive through a flowering resplendent prairie. The light brings to life and models the animals placed in the first plane, among the flowers, grasses and the distant towering peaks. The impressionistic quality of the narrative of the painting itself is rendered by dots, spots, patches of color from which the animals and grasses emerge. Painting of such a large mural in the technique usually associated with the small oil work had to be difficult—how to focus, give scale, distance and control color in detail. That painting technique is effectively establishing the lyrical quality, of simple act driving the cattle in the spring, grassy, luminous, flowery landscape towards distant bluer mountainous hills.

In Watrous, Saskatchewan local artist Michael Gaudet convinced the owner of Animal Hospital, Dr. Kessler to donate the large empty wall of his enterprise to a better cause. The mural, which adorns the wall now is composed of three separate scenes, all of which depict the animals: the farm life, the bison prairie and the winter scene. Its happy mood glorifies the beauty and simplicity of life on the prairie and participation of animals in this life.

There are other scenes featured on the prairie buildings, like the large flying object on the sports arena in Botha, Alberta. Their meaning is decorative, attracting the eye when passing on the highway, but the subject does not carry same message as others. Its pure adornment, an object in the sky and not an empty corrugated metal wall.

Spanning the gap between naïve and commercial art the "Saskatchewan Sunset" sponsored by Zawislak Law Office in Wadena Saskatchewan depicts a local scene. The evening is falling, blue of the afternoon sky still lurks under heavy, distant clouds bathed on the underside in a rosy glow by the color of the sunset. In the foreground bales of hay are scattered through the fields. Behind, a flowering canola field and a lake, a large patch of yellow to one side and the blue of water

to the other, fill the space of the painting, extending to the dark of the horizon. The painting is a long, linear composition, its horizontality expressive of the endless expanse of the wheat fields. The vertical forms of two groups of grain elevators are juxtaposed against the strong horizontal lines of the railroad and the horizon: one old, wooden and solitary, and the other new, a metallic battery of shining drums.

## CONCLUSION

Recent farmer cooperative mergers and modernization of the grain operations leads to the demolition of clusters of towers. In Alberta alone only about 600 are believed to remain from the previously estimated 6000. Small towns, once bustling with the activity are empty now. Larger towns survive better if they have established independent economic base. But they too suffer loss: the dispersion of businesses from the center to the outskirts of the town adjoining the highway, and the pictorial loss of the wooden towers as an active part of the townscape.

The frequency, with which art is found in small and large towns, emphasizes the importance it has to prairie town dwellers. Among the various forms of graphic and artistic expression figurative art is the most recent. Its development coincides with the disappearance of the elevator towers and the dramatic change in the prairie way of life. The replacement of the actual everyday life with pictorial representation, which captures the essence of prairie life, speaks of loss and helps to retain in the collective memory remembrance of the days past. Life, led in full symbiosis with the earth, closer yet to those early prairie days when people, animals, earth and sky were one, is symbolized, at least for present generations of prairie inhabitants, by grain elevator imagery: the impact of straight powerful shafts set against horizontal plain of the sky.