

A Trek to the Swiss Alpine Club Association and The Mountaineers in Seattle: Archival Work for an Honours Thesis

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The title of my honours thesis project, *Bridging the Bergschrund: Depictions of Glaciers in the Berner Oberland and Wallis Regions of the Alps and the 'American Alps' from the late 18th-century to the Present* traced the visualisation of glaciers in landlocked areas such as the Swiss Alps and Northern Cascades in Washington State through time and mediums such as painting and photography. Glaciers have long been synonymous with exploration, scientific inquiry, fear and fascination, and recreation. Now, they have become a poster child for climate change, their recession modelled and charted not only through data, but in the pictorial documents from the Romantic era (Matilsky, 1983). From early panoramas to field sketches, large-format paintings to satellite images, the faces of glaciers have been rendered in a variety of media. Their creators are just as multifaceted, serving as artists, geologists, mountaineers, and explorers. However, despite the progression of technology, artistic movements, our approach to depicting glaciers has remained stagnant, replicating the landscape painting conventions fostered by the German Romantics. Glaciers and their terrain are overwhelming, incomprehensible, and terrifying. To overcome these fears, humans rationalise and attempt to control the landscape, a mechanism that is defined by Kant in regard to the sublime. The influence of Romantic artists on the genre of landscape painting cannot be understated. Almost all Alps-adjacent regions – Germany, Switzerland, and France embraced this approach in art, inadvertently espousing a world where the human lies outside and distinct from their landscape. The residual effects of both the artistic and ideological views of the era can still be seen today in the calls to 'preserve pristine wilderness' which in itself, is a socially constructed myth (Cronon, 1996). Art depicting glaciers conveys the need for human control and creates a hierarchy whereby humans dominate nature, a separatist relationship that threatens our ability to confront climate change and salvage the very landscape we have damaged.



Figure 1: A black and white photograph of a vast, snow-covered mountain range. The foreground shows a valley with dark evergreen trees and patches of snow. The middle ground features rolling hills and ridges covered in snow. In the background, a large, prominent mountain peak rises, its upper sections heavily glaciated and partially obscured by mist or low clouds. The overall scene is a high-altitude alpine landscape.

In order to complete my archival research, I traveled to the Grindelwald region of the Swiss Alps in the summer of 2019. I spent the summer break and Spring Break to look at original paintings and photographs of the Alps from the 17th to 19th century. Particularly, I was focused on the depictions of glaciers in two regions of the Swiss Alps and the Northern Cascades in Washington State which are considered the "American Alps" (Wilke, 2012). I developed invaluable research skills including intensive work with Special Collections at the Zentralbibliothek and University of Washington, as well as tracking and tracing the right materials to

support my honours. The millions of objects to sift through in the catalogue was an intense learning curve and prepared me to do graduate level work in locating primary resources and handling old documents from the 18th century. My honours project was an interdisciplinary endeavour, grounded in art historical theory and analysis but also integrated discourse on ecological art, environmental thought in Germany, the sublime, and the anthropology of mountaineering and how it has defined our current understandings and images of glaciers.

Faculty Mentor: Jens Klenner/Birgit Tautz

Funded by Grua/O'Connell Research Award & Mini-Grant

References

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