THE MYSTERY OF
GRAFTON TYLER BROWN

RACE, ART AND LANDSCAPE IN 19TH CENTURY BRITISH COLUMBIA

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SAN FRANCISCO ARTIST GRAFTON TYLER BROWN, 1883
IMAGE A-08775 COURTESY OF THE ROYAL BC MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES

DIRECTOR'S FOREWORD

While Grafton Tyler Brown's work has been held in several public and private collections in our region for decades, this is the first time his work has been shown together in a focused exhibition in Victoria since he lived here in the 1880s. The University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries is pleased to collaborate with Dr. John Lutz, Chair of UVic History Department, to make his research into Grafton Tyler Brown visible to new audiences. It is Legacy's mission to be a leader in cultural and academic collaborations that allow us to be a site for the research and presentation of art. Lutz's discovery of Brown's work while digging through the Saanich Archives, and then subsequent research and interpretation, allows for a new contribution to the art history of Victoria. It helps us to flesh out a vision of the nascent cultural scene of the young city. I imagine an eleven-year old Emily Carr viewing Brown's work on display in a building not far from her father's store on Wharf Street.

Beyond the mere facts of Brown's presence in Victoria, a city that had few professional artists at the time, this exhibition asks us to consider larger issues around race and ethnicity. We find ourselves questioning the harsh realities that made it necessary for this artist to pass as white. We think about Brown in the historical context of racism and society, but even more to the point, this exhibition helps us consider what these forces and his actions might mean in a contemporary context.

Mary Jo Hughes, Director
University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries

THE MYSTERY OF GRAFTION TYLER BROWN

I was introduced to the mysteries of Grafton Tyler Brown by chancing upon an arresting and almost photo-realistic image in the Saanich Archives of the historic Deans Farm from 1882-3 for which, as far as I know, no other photographic or artistic image exists. Here was a unique window into the forgotten world of the Shelbourne Valley when it was farmland and quite remote from the town of Victoria. What other such opportunities to travel back in time did this artist leave us?

This experience sent me to look for more work by the artist whose neatly printed name appears in the bottom left corner, "G.T. Brown." Today, when I have a mystery, my first step is to "Google" it. My search revealed that these were the works of Grafton Tyler Brown, a famous—probably the most famous—African American artist of the North American West in the 19th century whose paintings now sell into the tens of thousands of dollars.[1] While he is famous, he is not well documented. He had no descendants, left no personal papers, and only two photos of him survive, leaving all kinds of questions: How did he end up in British Columbia? What did he paint here? How long was he here for? Where are the rest of his paintings?

Following these threads to the provincial archives, I made another astonishing discovery. The original *Deans Farm* sketch and three oil paintings from this same artist were there—one of the Gorge in Victoria and two of the interior of British Columbia. But more surprising, there were also black and white photographs taken in 1883 of his B.C. paintings, which were first exhibited in Victoria over 133 years ago! Here were 22 previously unknown windows into what the City of Victoria, the surrounding area, and southern B.C. looked like in the 1880s.
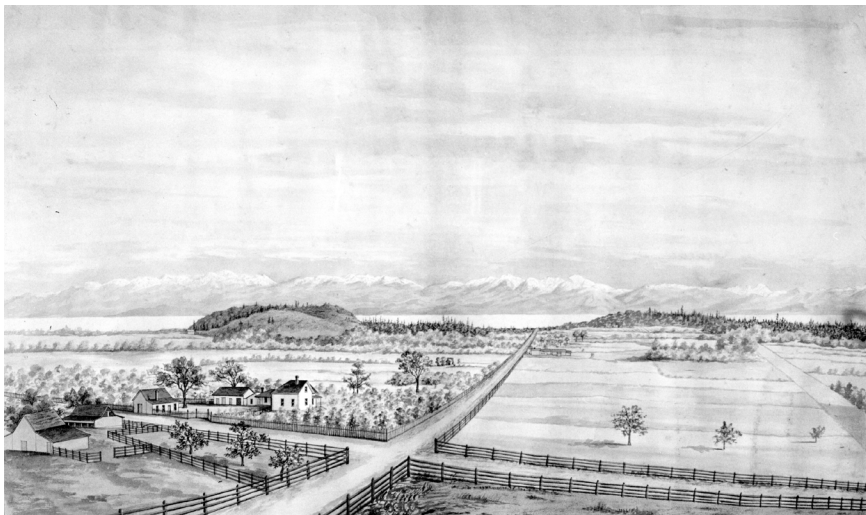
DEANS FARM, SAANICH, BC, 1880S. PEN AND INK ON PAPER, 42.90 X 71.00 CM
IMAGE PDP00124 COURTESY OF THE ROYAL BC MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES

G. T. BROWN & CO. OF SAN FRANCISCO INVOICING FINDLEY, DURHAM, AND BRODIE OF VICTORIA FOR JOHN SULLIVAN DEAS SALMON CAN LABELS, 1875. IMAGE MS 1999 COURTESY OF THE ROYAL BC MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES

One of the many mysteries of Grafton Tyler Brown is why his work is unknown to us in British Columbia? Perhaps an even more intriguing mystery is: how did one of the most famous Black American artists of the 19th Century become known as a "White" artist when he came to British Columbia?

GRAFTON TYLER BROWN – THE SAN FRANCISCO LITHOGRAPHER

Brown was African American by birth. His parents, Thomas and Wilhelmina, were two free Blacks who had left the slave state of Maryland for the free state of Pennsylvania in 1837. Grafton Tyler Brown, born February 22, 1841, was the first of three sons and a daughter, all of whom are registered as Black in the censuses of the period.

At the age of 17, Brown headed west for Sacramento, California, on his own, and worked over the next two years as a hotel steward and porter where the local census and directory makers described him as "Black" and "colored." There, his painting caught the attention of the local paper that reported in November 1859: "We noticed last evening some very excellent painting done by Grafton T. Brown, a servant boy in the St. George Hotel. … The lad has never taken lessons but his execution will compare favourably with that of acknowledged artists."

In a move that changed his life, and it would seem, his race, Brown left Sacramento for San Francisco in 1861, at the age of 20. Once there, he was hired as an artist by a German printer Charles Conrad Kuchel. Brown's job was to travel around new mining towns in California, Nevada, and Oregon to draw panoramic or "bird's eye views," which Kuchel would then lithograph in his shop and sell back to the townspeople, many of whom had also paid extra to have their homes and businesses prominently represented.

Kuchel died in 1864 and left his business in debt, so his widow turned the business over to Brown. Over the next decade, Grafton T. Brown and Co. took the lead in colour printing on the Pacific Coast. In 1870, the first salmon cannery owner in British Columbia, John Sullivan Deas, directed his business toward Brown's lithography company when he needed some colourful labels. Deas was an African American entrepreneur himself and likely knew Brown from when they both lived near each other in San Francisco. From the age of 24, the former Black porter came to own an established print shop in San Francisco and was one of only 55 lithographers in the entire United States. But by 1870, he was no longer entirely Black.

Whether by chance or more likely by craft, when Grafton Tyler Brown, who had inherited his father's lighter colouring, was enumerated by the San Francisco directory makers for the 1861 census, he was listed without the designation "colored" applied to Blacks. The 1870 census-taker called him a "mulatto" suggesting he was thought to have only one African American parent. That same year, the Dun and Bradstreet credit agency called him a "quadroon" meaning that he was thought to have a single African American grandparent. By the census of 1880, he was listed as "White." Race, the idea that people can be rigidly separated by their looks, proved itself to be quite arbitrary and open to interpretation.

GRAFTON TYLER BROWN – THE BRITISH COLUMBIA ARTIST

In 1882, Brown moved again and reinvented himself once more. Now generally accepted as "White," he decided to make a living as a painter selling original landscape paintings. He chose to do this in Victoria, B.C.

When Brown first moved to San Francisco he boarded at the What Cheer House and met Amos Bowman, another boarder there. Many

GIANT'S CASTLE MOUNTAIN, 1883. OIL ON CANVAS, 58.50 X 84.00 CM
IMAGE COURTESY OF UNO LANGMANN LIMITED

years later, Bowman was hired by the Canadian Government to do a geological survey of southern British Columbia. Brown accompanied the survey as a draughtsman, giving himself the opportunity to travel and sketch the scenic grandeur of this "almost unknown territory" as the *British Colonist* newspaper described it.

Brown joined the Bowman party by September 1882 as they travelled from Kamloops, south through the Okanagan Valley, west up the Similkameen River, and back to the Fraser River at Hope by late October. By November, Brown had established himself in a studio in the Occidental Hotel at the corner of Store and Johnson Streets in Victoria. The *British Colonist* newspaper directed clients to him, describing him as "an artist of more than local celebrity in California and elsewhere."

The newspaper told Victorians that Brown was proposing to turn the sketches from his B.C. survey expedition into paintings "and will furnish any of them to order that visitors may take a fancy to." Brown also received orders for "vanity" images (commissioned drawings of people's houses, farms, and businesses). The only known vanity painting that he completed from B.C. was a commissioned pen and ink sketch of George Deans' farm, which was located in the Shelbourne Valley in Saanich.

Brown rendered his sketches of southern B.C., along with scenic views from around Victoria, into oil paintings and arranged to open his first art show in June 1883. The *British Colonist* described and promoted the work:

> Yesterday was the opening day of the exhibition at *The Colonist*'s new building of oil paintings from the brush of our local artist, Mr. G. T. Brown. Viewed in the light of artistic productions they were excellent, but when inspected by those with whom the scenes represented were familiar, their fidelity elicited an extra meed of praise...

A reviewer described Brown as "the pioneer of this intellectual and refined art" and "the first to supply the young people of this city with the grand ideas of the 'noble art'" of landscape painting. The exhibition catalogue that accompanied the show listed 22 paintings depicting areas traversed by Brown the previous summer and several of Mount Baker, the Gorge, and Esquimalt and Victoria Harbours.

By August 1884, Brown had moved across the straits and made Tacoma, Washington his base. He advertised mountain scenery as his specialty, offering "views of Mt. Tacoma, Mt. Hood, Mt. Baker, Mt. Adams and others. Scenes on the Columbia River and Puget Sound on hand and painted to order." By spring 1885, Brown had moved to Portland where he helped create the Portland Art Club that brought together the best amateur and professional artists in the city. The regular interaction with fellow artists changed his paintings, which began to incorporate more abstract elements.

In 1889, Brown moved again, this time to Helena, Montana, the gateway to Yellowstone, where he sold his mountain and geyser paintings, largely to the tourist market. The itinerant painter, who had been single his whole life was joined in Helena by Albertine Espey, a French-born woman 20 years his junior and recently widowed by the death of Edward Espey, a close friend and studio-mate of Brown's in Portland.

Brown gave up painting in 1892 for reasons unknown. Together, the pair moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, where Brown worked as a draughtsman for the US Army Corp of Engineers and the City of St. Paul as a commercial photographer. He retired in 1916 and died March 2, 1918. Born "colored," his death certificate described him as "White".

Brown had come from a poor family in Pennsylvania, travelled extensively through the Canadian and American west, and finally settled in the headwaters of the Mississippi. In the process, he had also changed his race from Black to White, a transition helped by his remarkable talents and an artistic career that he launched with British Columbia scenery in Victoria in 1883.

ABOVE THE GORGE, 1883. OIL ON CANVAS, 40.70 X 63.50 CM
IMAGE PDP00153 COURTESY OF THE ROYAL BC MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES

UNDISCOVERED GRAFTON TYLER BROWN PAINTINGS

This is pure speculation but I cannot help but think that while life as an artist was financially precarious, the life of a once Black man passing as White must have been fraught with all kinds of anxiety that is hard to comprehend. To make his new identity work, he would have had to cut himself off from any community he had in San Francisco, and associate with the racist democrats of San Francisco and likely many racist art purchasers in Victoria, Portland, and Helena. I wonder, too, whether any of his frequent moves were the result of cracks in his White identity in this very racist milieu. To escape a life as a porter and a labourer trapped at the bottom of American society, he took some huge risks and no doubt paid a high price. In the end, Brown seems to have done well for himself—finding middle class stability and a life-long partner.

Over his 75 years, Brown went from obscurity and poverty to relative fame as an artist then back to obscurity. A price list from the 1880s shows his paintings selling from $35 to $350. Today, his work fetches prices up to $75,000. Most of his B.C. paintings have not been located and could be hidden in plain sight, while the fame of the artist remains unbeknownst to their owners. So take a closer look at those landscapes on your wall and dig out the ones tucked away in storage!

Dr. John Lutz, Professor
University of Victoria History Department

FOOTNOTES

[1]Brown is mentioned in Samella Lewis, *African American Art and Artists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); David C. Driskell, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976); Guy C. McElroy, Richard Powell, and Sharon Patton, *African American Artists 1880-1987* (Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, in association with Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1989) and Lynn M. Igoe and James Igoe, *250 Years of Afro-American Art* (New York: Bowker Co., 1981). It is not just scholars interested in Black artists that have noticed him; he is also prominent in histories of art generally, such as Edan Milton Hughes, *Artists in California 1786-1940* (San Francisco: Hughes Publishing Co., 1989); Doris Dawdy, *Artists of the American West: A Biographical Dictionary* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1974); Peter E. Palmquist and Thomas R. Kailbourn, *Pioneer Photographers of the Far West: A Biographical Dictionary1840-1865* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000). John Reps describes him as the "only known black to have been an American viewmaker" in *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984). There is also a book about Brown by Robert J. Chandler, *San Francisco Lithographer: African American Artist Grafton Tyler Brown* (University of Oklahoma, 2014). Prior to the exhibition at the University of Victoria Legacy Art Galleries, there has been a travelling exhibit of Brown's art, which was conceived in Oakland California and travelled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and other prominent galleries.

SOURCES

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United States Census, 1895, 1905.

SELECTED EXHIBITION LIST

All works by Grafton Tyler Brown (African American, 1841-1918) unless otherwise noted.

1. *Untitled (Lake with Folding Mountains)*, 1883. Oil on canvas (55.50 x 80.00 cm) Craigdarroch Castle Historical Museum Society

2. *Sunset at Stave Lake, BC*, 1882. Oil on canvas (48.50 x 73.50 cm) Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Gift of the Thomas Gardiner Keir Bequest

3. *Giant's Castle Mountain*, 1883. Oil on canvas (58.50 x 84.00 cm) Uno Langmann Limited

4. *Long Lake*, 1883. Oil on canvas (39.20 x 64.50 cm) PDP00119 Royal BC Museum and Archives

5. *Spallumacheen*, 1883. Oil on canvas (39.50 x 64.90 cm) PDP00120 Royal BC Museum and Archives

6. *Above the Gorge*, 1883. Oil on canvas (40.70 x 63.50 cm) PDP00153 Royal BC Museum and Archives

7. *Deans Farm, Saanich*, 1880s. Pen and ink on paper (42.90 x 71.00 cm) PDP00124 Royal BC Museum and Archives

8. *Entrance to the Harbor*, Victoria, 1883. Oil on canvas (60 x 85 cm) Private Collection

9. Attributed to Grafton Tyler Brown, *View Taken Near Esquimalt*, 1880s. Oil on paper mâché (21.80 x 21.80 cm) Private Collection

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We know Grafton Tyler Brown (1841-1918) was one of the first professional landscape artists to work in the Pacific Northwest. His few regional paintings that survive offer vivid windows into the world of 1880s Victoria and British Columbia. Yet, how did this African American artist succeed at a time when racial prejudice prevented most Blacks from entering any skilled profession?