

Astrud Reed - University of Oklahoma - Art History Minor

Spring 2012 Directed Readings: AHI 4960

Professor B. Byronn Price, Charles Russell Center Director

Photographers and the 19th Century Western Landscape (1865-1900)

The transformation from the early to mid nineteenth-century European pastoral-styled scenic paintings from artists like Albert Bierstadt and Thomas Moran, to the landscape photography of the American West from 1865-1900 brought about more than an artistic shift in how the western world depicted their surroundings. American West landscape photography helped to shape and record a cultural explosion that saw interest in a less romanticized, and more "real", portrayal of a new domain. Beginning with survey work, photographers Timothy O'Sullivan, Eadweard Muybridge, and Carlton Watkins, along with many others, documented life and splendor in the barren desert and mountain landscapes of the virgin west that had previously been thought of as uninhabitable, and devoid of any beauty. What began as government and railroad funded, pictorial record keeping ultimately morphed into a cultural identity linking the hardships of the West with an American character that could conquer the wilderness. "As the western landscape became a compelling subject for photographers in the 1860s and '70s, it was quickly promoted as part of, and embraced within, broader currents of American popular thought. Shaped and bounded by printed words, western landscape photographs became a potent part of prevailing myths about the West as a blank slate upon

which Americans could inscribe their own future.”¹

The “great surveys” of the post Civil War period were designed to map the terrain and document resources around the government owned railroad land. The government also used these projects to infuse funds and valuable geographic information into the economy through private industry ventures. The first of these surveys appointed the dynamic Clarence King as geologist with the mission of exploring the fortieth parallel route of the transcontinental railroad. Timothy O’Sullivan was the main fortieth parallel photographer. The expedition was well funded and manned, affording O’Sullivan the ability to apply his trade, that began with studio work and moved into documentation of the Civil War, in a professional manner. King’s main focus for the photographer was on the rugged conditions and geological physiognomies of the west. O’Sullivan’s pieces from the King expedition depict the harsh lines of rock formations with sparse vegetation, often using high contrast. His images were well known in Washington, D.C., since King’s official governmental reports often used O’Sullivan’s pieces, which later landed him the job as the U.S. Treasury Department’s chief photographer. “In his Civil War photographs O’Sullivan developed the style that he perfected in his expeditionary photographs. His mature work appears distinctly modern, combining a cool objectivity with an understated use of design and composition. He never romanticized his landscapes (for example, by choosing dramatic

¹ Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), page 206 (Chapter 5) “Westward the Course of Empire: Photography and the Invention of an American Future.”

camera angles), but he could exploit the aesthetic possibilities in the barren landscape.”² Timothy O’Sullivan also accompanied First Lieutenant George M. Wheeler on his 1871 west of the 100th meridian expedition that surveyed eastern California, central and northwestern Arizona, and southern Nevada and Utah. The large team was tasked with preparing maps, observing native populations, choosing premier locations for future roads, railroads, and military bases, as well as studying mineral and water sources, climate, vegetation, and agricultural potential. In 1873, O’Sullivan took a group to New Mexico and photographed the “Ancient Ruins in the Canyon de Chelle.” This image uses artistic nuances like lighting, contrast, and composition, to highlight the focal point of the ruins, and depth of field with a soft-focused foreground leading the viewer’s eye to the stark lines of the cliff face down to the Anasazi dwelling, dramatically accentuating a past civilization, while making a current statement about the receding Native American culture. O’Sullivan’s ability to seamlessly meld scientific, documentary photography, with an artist’s eye makes his work from this period very important to this day as the debate rages on over the “real” aspect of photography, as opposed to painting, in landscape depictions. Other great landscape photographers emerged from survey work to include William Henry Jackson, A. J. Russell, and Eadweard Muybridge, but the most famous was Carleton E. Watkins, best known for his stunning Yosemite pieces shot with mammoth plate and stereoscopic cameras, expertly mounted and captioned, that eventually heralded national protection of the area. “The

² Witkin, Lee D. and Barbara London, “Selected Photographers: A Collector’s Compendium,” *The Photograph Collector’s Guide*. (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1979), page 205.

photographs are significant in the history of American landscape photography as the first body of work to systematically present the landscape as a wilderness before the arrival of man. They are not the first landscape photographs, but they are the first to present nature from a deliberately assumed artistic posture.”³ These images capture the breathtaking harmonious beauty of nature undisturbed, while also revealing the impressive size of the physical structures. Like O’Sullivan, Watkins was a master of field photography, wielding portable darkrooms and transporting large glass plate negatives by wagon and horseback. Landscape photographers of the era also began to experiment with technique. Muybridge derived a method called a “sky shade” that reduced sky overexposure so clouds could be included in landscape photographs. Muybridge is best known for *The Horse in Motion* from 1882 in which he attempted to stop action by taking a series of shots of a moving object. His study became the basis for moving pictures. O’Sullivan’s Flaming Gorge Canyon six exposures over the course of a day study documented the change in light, shadow, and texture created by the movement of the sun – landscape photography’s main light source.

Nineteenth century technological advances brought photographers out of the studio, making this early fieldwork possible, but the next phase of changes that brought western landscape photography to the people, changed the nation. “At a moment when the desire to commune with nature had matured to the point of mellowing, the photographers injected it with a

³ Weston J. Naef and James N. Wood, *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West 1860-1885* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1975), page 79.

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fresh quota of reality and fact, informed on the one hand by a sensitivity to geological science, and on the other by an authentic understanding of the spiritual resonance which, in America, was inseparable from natural fact.”⁴ Three-dimensional stereographs printed on card stock became very popular, as well as accessible by the middle class, in the mid to late 1800s and most of the period’s landscape photographers carried both a stereograph and a mammoth plate camera in the field. As the forerunner to movies and television, these images were both educational and entertaining, serving to make the world more connected. In this era of exploration, travel and movement were critical for photographers to keep their audiences satisfied. The landscape photographers played a huge role in shaping what we still consider today to be the “American spirit”: the ability to tame what is wild. The advent of newspapers and magazines including large-scale photographs that captured the great expanses in printed materials, paved the way for even more people to be exposed to the rugged beauty and inviting promise of the American West. The addition of words to photographs made them into huge tools for learning and persuasion, while also giving “armchair travelers” a sense of personal adventure. “The practical imperatives and social organization of survey work spurred pictorial innovation . . . There was strange new work to be done, and a rich array of new graphic techniques and ideas with which to do it.”⁵

⁴ Barbara Novak, “Landscape Permuted; from Painting to Photography,” in *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present*. Edited by Vicki Goldberg, (New York: Simon and Schuster 1981), pages 171-172.

⁵ Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), page 3.

Landscape photography became popular with average people in the nineteenth century who believed that, unlike eighteenth century scenic paintings, this was an accurate depiction of the world. The photographers understood how subjective this thinking was. These new lands were seen by the outside world in the manner that the photographer chose with documentation of past and present indigenous peoples severely downplayed, existing western populations at times conveniently left out, often revealing only unique vistas there were not the standard features dominating specific large expanses. “The pursuit of exactitude was a solitary activity, and no one else could verify that an illustrator had satisfied its demands.”⁶ Tasked with the responsibility to preserve history, spur on valuable economic exploration, while also portraying a reverence for nature and open spaces, the survey photographers from 1865-1900 each had to struggle with their own demons when finding balance between personal financial stability, science, art, and human perspectives. Ultimately, their artistic variance “calls attention to our dependency for what we see upon the photographer’s choices and the camera’s position, the pictures raise a question about cognition, the relation between seeing, investigating, and knowing – the question which lies at the base of the survey as a whole.”⁷

⁶ Robin Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), page 57.

⁷ Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), page 134 (Chapter 3) "Naming the View."