

EXHIBIT REVIEW

America's Cathedrals: Photography and the National Parks. Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego. February 20, 2016, December 31, 2016.

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One of the great pleasures of being a large-format photographer is to view your subject on a large ground glass. Even though the image is upside down and backwards to the eye, the photographer now sees the world as a cathedral of light and shadow—he or she experiences the creative moment with both eyes wide open.

The 100th anniversary of the National Park System is being celebrated by the Museum of Photographic Arts with a small group of images made by photographers who first pointed their large-format cameras at our American cathedrals. The handful of photographs represented in the exhibit is a history lesson of photography's pioneers of the western landscape and native peoples.

These early explorers of our soon-to-be national parks were not only drawn by unexplored wilderness but also by the possibility of imaging a subject few had seen and fewer had access to. Our National Parks System stands today as one of the greatest gifts that our republic has bequeathed to its citizens and holds in trust for generations to come. Those who captured the first images of these places rightly deserve celebration alongside the parks themselves, as these photographers publicized the spectacular landscapes but also set in motion the movement to preserve them. Our National Parks System, where we take our children to visit and can teach them the necessity of the wilderness, balances precariously between access and preservation.

Carleton Watkins came to the California gold fields in 1851. After a series of jobs he became an assistant to a San Francisco daguerreotypist where he learned the arts of being a photographer. In 1861, Watkins did find gold of a different type when he began to photograph Yosemite Valley with a mammoth 18x22-inch glass plate view camera. These large-format photographs hold incredible detail and tonal range and were seen by senators and congressmen. These photographs led President Abraham Lincoln to sign a bill in 1864 that transferred the Yosemite Valley to the state of California with the stipulation that the lands be preserved for public recreational use. Watkins's work helped ensure that Yosemite Valley would never be broken, infringed, or dishonored, thus paving the way for our National Park System.

Another explorer and photographer of the West with a print in the exhibit is John K. Hillers. Hillers came to America in 1852 and worked first as a policeman and then a soldier during the Civil War. After the war he re-enlisted and served in the western garrisons until 1870. While working as a teamster in Salt Lake City, he met John Wesley Powell, who had explored the Green and Colorado Rivers. In 1871 Powell retraced his exploration, but this time used Hillers as the expedition photographer, resulting in views of the two rivers.

Hillers's introduction to the West as a photographer began a career of documenting the cultures of the Navajo, Zuni, and Paiute tribes. He was especially talented in posing Native Americans in their tribal clothing and supportive artifacts like pottery, blankets, and rifles. When studying a larger collection of his sunlit exterior-made portraits, they take on a surreal quality as if made for a 20th century fashion magazine.

As the centennial of the National Park Service draws to a close, visitors to the Museum of Photographic Arts will have a welcome opportunity to reflect on a formative time in the history of both wilderness preservation and American photography.

BOOK NOTES

Borderland Films: American Cinema, Mexico and Canada during the Progressive Era. By Dominique Brégent-Heald. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2015. Illustrations, notes, filmography, bibliography, and index. 448 pp. \$60 cloth. This monograph investigates how American cinema portrayed the northern and southern borderlands in a time when the First World War and the Mexican Revolution weighed heavily on the national conscience. The author explores how films dealt with issues of race, gender, crime, and national security and thus influenced audiences' understanding of American identity and the place of the United States in the world.

Building the Golden Gate Bridge: A Workers' Oral History. By Harvey Schwartz. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. Illustrations, notes, and index. 187 pp. \$29.95 cloth. Labor Historian Harvey Schwartz has compiled oral histories of twelve men and women—from an engineer to nurses to ironworkers—involved in the building of the iconic structure. An introduction and photographs complement the workers' accounts and help illuminate working-class life and labor in the 1930s.

Empire Maker: Aleksandr Baranov and Russian Colonial Expansion into Alaska and Northern California. By Kenneth N. Owens with Alexander Yu. Petrov. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015. Illustrations, maps, notes, bibliography,

and index. 360 pp. \$50 cloth. Aleksandr Baranov took control of Russia's sea otter trade in 1790 and was leader of the enterprise when the Russian American Company was formed in 1799, a position he kept until 1818. *Empire Maker* examines Baranov's tenure in America, in the process highlighting Russian expansion along the Pacific Coast and the complex interactions among Native Americans, Russians, Spaniards, Britons, and Americans.

Inspiration and Innovation: Religion in the American West (Western History Series). By Todd M. Kerstetter. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015. Illustrations and index. xi + 275 pp. \$81.95 cloth. \$26.95 paper. \$21.99 digital. In this textbook Kerstetter places religion into the historical narrative of the American West and the West into the discussion of religious studies. *Inspiration and Innovation* examines Western history from pre-contact to the present and includes consideration of Indigenous beliefs, Russian Orthodox Christianity, Mormonism, Hispanic Catholicism, and Judaism. The text shows the relationship between religion and the region through diverse groups of people, places, and events.

Leaders of the Mexican American Generation: Biographical Essays. Edited by Anthony Quiroz. Foreword by Arnoldo De León. Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2016. Preface, illustrations, and index. 368 pp. \$34.95 cloth. \$24.95 cloth. \$19.95 digital. *Leaders of the Mexican American Generation* is a collection of 13 biographical essays covering a broad spectrum of Mexican Americans between 1920 and 1965, including labor activists, scholars, intellectuals, as well as legal and political leaders. Their stories shed light not only on the role this generation played shaping Mexican American identity in general, but American civil rights in particular.

Showdown in the Big Quiet: Land, Myth, and Government in the American West. By John P. Bieter, Jr.. Foreword by Gordon Morris Bakken. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2015. Illustrations, maps, and index. xviii + 292 pp. \$70 cloth. \$39.95 paper. While the Big Quiet, a large and sparsely populated region of Owyhee County, Idaho, may not at first seem an obvious choice of historical inquiry, Bieter shows how centuries of struggle over its use reveal broader themes of Western history, in particular the role of government and notions of American identity. Bieter argues that those contesting the land embraced the power of western mythology, with its notions of rugged individualism, violence, and democracy, a direct challenge to the ascendancy of the "New" Western history into the American imagination.