

Carleton E. Watkins: The Story of a Reputation

The reception of Carleton Watkins's work, from the 1860s to today, reveals a great deal about both the nature of cultural memory and changing attitudes toward photography. Famous worldwide by the early 1860s, Watkins's work fell gradually out of favor and was effectively forgotten for almost a century. When rediscovered in the 1970s, his mammoth-plate photographs were a revelation. He was almost immediately acknowledged as the single greatest 19th century American landscape photographer, and our photo-history texts and museum collections were revised accordingly. That high reputation has only further solidified in the following years.

Watkins's story is dramatic, but far from unique. Every generation interprets the past on its own terms. Each era creates, in the phrase of Van Wyck Brooks, a "usable past,"¹ an intuitively resonant history that underscores its values and serves its interests. As a result, many aspects of the past can be lost for generations before rising to new cultural significance.

Carleton Watkins established his professional brand and received widespread fame for his photographs of Yosemite. For a time, the name of his business in San Francisco was the "Yosemite Gallery." Watkins first visited the site in 1861, using both an 18x22 inch mammoth plate camera and a stereo camera. He returned in 1865 and 1866, under the auspices of the California State Geological Survey, and was in Yosemite again in 1872, 1875, 1878, 1879, and 1881.

This work was quickly acclaimed by influential patrons and supporters. These included Josiah Dwight Whitney, William Henry Brewer, and Clarence King, the leading figures in the California Geological Survey, who promoted Watkins's work to the scientific community at Yale University and elsewhere. Beginning at least as early as 1862, his work was known to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frederic Law Olmsted, leading figures in the San Francisco literary and painting communities, and influential California politicians. His Yosemite views were displayed at the Goupil Art Gallery in New York City in December 1862. They also made the rounds of the nation's capitol and helped convince President Lincoln to sign legislation in 1864 to protect Yosemite from development. Watkins was praised in the *North Pacific Review* and *Atlantic Monthly* in 1863, and in the *Philadelphia Photographer* in 1866. In 1867 he displayed a group of Yosemite prints at that year's Paris Exposition.

Watkins was the best photographer of Yosemite, but he was not the only one. Two others competed for the market for large scale photographs of the site. Charles L. Weed (1824-1903) photographed there in 1859 with a camera of about 11x14 inch format, and again in 1864 with a mammoth plate camera. Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1904) made his own mammoth plate views in 1867 and 1872. Each of these three photographers used a distinct visual approach to the place. Watkins's views were technically perfect and elegantly, classically

organized. Weed's views, in general, are stolid and rather static, while Muybridge's are brilliantly complex with an almost Mannerist sense of graphic energy. As the three recorded many of the same motifs, buyers interested only in subject matter might have considered their images interchangeable. However, for those interested in both subject matter and aesthetic refinement, Watkins was the clear favorite. Neither Weed nor Muybridge made nearly as many negatives or prints of Yosemite as Watkins, but they certainly cut into his market.

As a professional, Watkins ran an elite, quasi bespoke, practice. At a time when most photographers supported themselves with portrait work, Watkins maintained a relatively narrow focus on landscape imagery, charged high prices, and advertised infrequently. He catered to a wealthy audience and his commissions and sales came largely as a result of personal connections and referrals. Watkins did recognize the range of markets for photographs in this era. On his 1866 Yosemite expedition, for example, he brought four different cameras—in the mammoth plate, 9 1/2 x 13", 6 1/2 x 8 1/2", and stereo formats—to make photographs for specific uses and markets. Nevertheless, it is clear that he took the greatest pride in his mammoth plate views.

For a variety of reasons, Watkins began having financial problems in the late 1860s. These were aggravated by the financial Panic of 1873 and a nationwide business recession lasting several years. At some point in 1874-1875, he went bankrupt and lost the contents of his San Francisco gallery—including all the negatives he had made up to that point. These went to a competitor, Isaiah W. Taber, and Watkins was forced to create a new catalogue of views from scratch.

Watkins worked valiantly after that, making impressive views of a number of subjects, but he was aging and remained financially strapped. By the early 1890s, he was suffering from arthritis and going blind. His business declined further and finally ended entirely. In 1906, he lost his entire stock of negatives and prints in the great San Francisco earthquake and fire. He died in 1916, indigent and incompetent, at the Napa State Hospital for the Insane. He was probably buried on hospital grounds, but no record or headstone indicates his grave.

Watkins's body left no physical trace and for years it seemed that his work had been similarly forgotten. For decades, mentions of Watkins's name were vanishingly scarce. In 1918, Charles B. Turrill published an error ridden account of Watkins's life in *News Notes of California Libraries*. In 1936, a two page profile appeared in *Yosemite Nature Notes*. In 1938, the historian Robert Taft gave Watkins prominent mention in his magisterial *Photography and the American Scene*—a capsule biography spanning three pages and reproductions of two works.

This marked the beginning of Watkins's recuperation by photo historians but that discipline was slow in taking modern form. In 1940, Ansel Adams included four Watkins prints in *A Pageant of Photography*, a large show at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco in conjunction with the Golden Gate International Exposition. However, this presentation did not spur much larger interest. Instead, in the following years, mentions of Watkins were typically in small publications such as *Yosemite Nature Notes*, *Westway*, and *Nature Magazine*. At the same time, his prints were quietly entering significant collections. Alden Scott Boyer's gift of his entire photography collection to the George Eastman House (now Museum) in 1950 included a number of mammoth plates of Yosemite.

In 1960, J. W. Johnson, a professor of hydraulic engineering at the University of California-Berkeley, made the first attempt at a Watkins monograph. His 64 page publication, *The Early Pacific Coast Photographs of*

Carleton E. Watkins, was one of a series of reports from the Berkeley Water Resources Center Archives. It included a biographical sketch, notes on process, and a summary of the Watkins holding of various American institutions.

In the nascent field of photo history, however, mentions of Watkins remained scarce for years. Beaumont Newhall made no reference to Watkins in the first three editions (1938, 1949, 1964) of his widely read text, *The History of Photography*. Watkins was not included in John Szarkowski's 1963 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *The Photographer and the American Landscape*, or in the 1969 edition of Peter Pollack's *Picture History of Photography*. Watkins did make fleeting appearances in a handful of other projects of the period. Robert Doty's 1965 exhibit at the Yale University Art Gallery, *Photography in America*, included one Watkins work, while Helmut and Alison Gernsheim's *The History of Photography* (1969), included a few brief mentions and one reproduction. In 1971, the Time Life book *Great Photographers*, part of the Life Library of Photography, devoted a double spread to Watkins with reproductions of two of his images of San Francisco. The "great photographer" designation was laudable, but the brief text and choice of images were uninspired.

This situation changed dramatically beginning in 1973, with the publication of John Szarkowski's book *Looking at Photographs*. Erudite and thought provoking, Szarkowski crafted a prose poem in celebration of photography, an enticement to look, think, and explore. It was read—and often re-read—by nearly everyone with an interest in the medium.

Szarkowski chose 100 works from the Museum of Modern Art's collection, each accompanied by an elegant one-page essay. The book's fourth plate is a Watkins mammoth plate of a single tree, "Arbutus Menziesii Pursh"—a 1965 MoMA purchase that Szarkowski described with the memorable phrase "as simple as a Japanese flag, and as rich as a dictionary." Szarkowski got the image's date wrong and provided no new biographical data, but he put Watkins on the map. He presented this little-known photographer on par with a host of canonical names, giving Watkins a place in the medium's pantheon. Szarkowski did this for aesthetic rather than antiquarian reasons. In truth, there was nothing quaint or Victorian about Watkins's photograph: its simplicity and directness resonated completely with modernist tastes. This presentation caught the field's attention and opened the door to a rapidly growing project of appreciation and scholarship. Many were spurred by the same thought: "Great image! Who is Watkins and what else did he do?"

From there, interest grew exponentially. In November 1973, Helen Johnson's Focus Gallery, in San Francisco, opened a 50 print show titled *Early Views of Yosemite and the California Missions* drawn from the holdings of Gordon L. Bennett, a pioneering local collector. In November 1974 Robert Doty opened a revised version of his *Photography in America* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of Art, in New York. Doty's earlier presentation at Yale University had included a single Watkins print. The Whitney show gave Watkins greater visibility with three images featured prominently in the exhibition catalogue.

In the spring of 1975, the exhibition and book *Era of Exploration: The Rise of landscape Photography in the American West, 1860-1885* made Watkins a genuine star. This landmark exhibition was curated by Weston J. Naef, Assistant Curator at the Metropolitan Museum, and James N. Wood, Associate Director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. This project was the first to examine the range of Watkins's production and to put him in the company of his better-known peers: Timothy O'Sullivan, Eadweard Muybridge, Andrew Joseph Russell, and William Henry Jackson. The exhibition was a revelation. I saw it and distinctly remember being overwhelmed by Watkins's prints. *Era of Exploration* demonstrated that Watkins was not simply another significant photographer of the 19th century West. He was the greatest of them all.

The show was widely praised and seen. It began at the Albright-Knox, in Buffalo, in March 1975, and then traveled to the Metropolitan Museum, the Dallas Museum of Art, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC, the Oakland Museum, and the St. Louis Art Museum, where it finished in the spring of 1976.

This exhibition spurred a wide range of curatorial, critical, and scholarly activity. The entire subject of 19th century expeditionary and documentary practice became newly interesting, both within and beyond the traditional bounds of the photography world. For example, the October 1975 issue of *Artforum* had two major articles on 19th century photographs of the American West by Barbara Novak and Max Kozloff, and an eight-page portfolio of images. Watkins was prominent in all three. It helped that John Coplans, the editor of *Artforum*, was an enthusiastic collector of this work. (Coplans published his own article, "C. E. Watkins at Yosemite," in the Nov/Dec 1978 issue of *Art in America*.) In 1976 Joel Snyder and Doug Munson organized a provocative exhibition for the Smart Gallery, University of Chicago, *The Documentary Photograph as a Work of Art: American Photographs, 1860-1876*, examining key issues raised by *Era of Exploration*.

Watkins became a subject of intense scholarly study. Mary Pauline Grenbeaux's M.A. thesis, *The Early Yosemite Photographs of Carleton E. Watkins*, appeared in 1976. In the same year, Richard Rudisill republished J. W. Johnson's *The Early Pacific Coast Photographs of Carleton E. Watkins* as part of the Museum of New Mexico reprint series. Paul Hickman's "Carleton E. Watkins, 1829-1916" was published as the January 1977 issue of *Northlight*. The fall 1978 issue of the California Historical Society's journal *California History* was devoted to Watkins, with essays by Rudisill, Grenbeaux, Nanette Sexton, Peter E. Palmquist, and others.

Not surprisingly, Watkins became a major name in the steadily expanding photo market. As noted in the *Photograph Collector's Guide* (1979) by Lee D. Witkin and Barbara London, mammoth plate prints by Watkins were both "rare" and "extremely high" in price. Dealers such as Daniel Wolf, in New York, were selling such prints for \$2,000 to \$4,000 each. In May 1979 the photo market was stunned by the sale of two albums of mammoth-plate prints, deaccessioned by New York City's University Club to raise money for operating expenses. Guided by presale interest from museums and collectors, Swann Galleries raised its original sales estimate from \$5,000 per album to a range of \$20,000-30,000. On May 10, 1979 bidding was fierce, led by Naef, on behalf of the Metropolitan Museum, and private dealers such as Wolf, George R. Rinhart, and Margaret Weston. Within minutes *Photographs of the Pacific Coast*, with 49 prints, was hammered down to Rinhart at \$98,000, followed by *Photographs of the Columbia River and Oregon*, with 51 prints, purchased by Weston at \$100,000. These sales sent shock waves across the entire field of photography. By the end of that year, *Photographs of the Pacific Coast* served as the inaugural exhibition at the new Fraenkel Gallery in San Francisco, while the *Columbia River and Oregon* album was documented in a fine monograph by James Alinder, David Featherstone, and Russ Anderson, co-published by the Friends of Photography and the Weston Gallery.

The culmination of this first decade of Watkins enthusiasm came in 1983 with Peter E. Palmquist's definitive exhibition, which debuted at the Amon Carter Museum in Fort Worth, with the accompanying monograph, *Carleton E. Watkins: Photographer of the American West*. A meticulous researcher, Palmquist became the leading authority on both Watkins and the larger subject of 19th century photography in California and the West. Palmquist's 1983 book presented much new information and he continued to add to his Watkins's files until his untimely death in 2003. Much impressive work has been done on Watkins since then, all indebted to Palmquist's achievement.

How and why did all this happen? How did Watkins vault, seemingly overnight, from the margins of history to the status of the finest 19th century American landscape photographer? Why did all of this happen when it did? The reasons are actually logical and clear; none of this was the result of PR spin or market manipulation. The answer lies in the actual nature of Watkins's work—its physical and visual qualities—and the rapid evolution of the photography field in the 1970s.

Until *Era of Exploration* in 1975, the realm of 19th century Western photography was almost completely dominated by two names: William Henry Jackson (1843-1942) and Timothy O'Sullivan (1840-1882). In addition to being unusually prolific, Jackson had the good fortune to live to the age of 99. He met and charmed photo-world personalities such as Ansel Adams and Beaumont Newhall, published an autobiography in 1940, and was the subject of a major monograph in 1947. O'Sullivan did not share Jackson's lifespan or public recognition, but was remembered as both a Civil War photographer and a participant in two of the four great post-Civil War western surveys. Notably, Ansel Adams promoted O'Sullivan's western work after discovering it in the 1930s.

For decades, the reputation of photographers like Jackson and O'Sullivan rested largely on the notion that they were "historians with a camera." This was, in fact, the subtitle of James D. Horan's 1955 monograph *Mathew Brady: Historian with a Camera*, and it is implicit in the subtitle of Horan's 1966 book on O'Sullivan's career: *Timothy O'Sullivan, America's Forgotten Photographer: The Life and Work of the Brilliant Photographer Whose Camera Recorded the American Scene from the Battlefields of the Civil War to the Frontiers of the West*. In this formulation, 19th century photographers were typically understood as faithful witnesses who made images uncomplicated by willful artistic or expressive choices. Logistical matters were routinely highlighted—the cumbersome equipment, the demands of the wet collodion process, and the difficulties of travel—while aesthetic quality was consistently subordinated to factual concerns. These photographs were appreciated far more for content than for form, as historical evidence rather than as works of visual interpretation and invention.

It is understandable how these ideas shaped general attitudes toward 19th century Western photographs through the 1960s. Jackson viewed himself largely in those terms, and much of O'Sullivan's production had been made for government archives and geological reference files. These ideas were so taken for granted that it was difficult to move discussion of such work from the "historian with a camera" paradigm to a more nuanced realm that took individual ideas and interpretive style seriously. It was fascinating to watch O'Sullivan's somewhat labored move across this conceptual divide in the 1970s and early 1980s. In some respects, Jackson's work never fully made this transition.

On the other hand, Watkins had relatively little "historian with a camera" baggage to shed. From the moment of his rediscovery in the photo world, he was acclaimed primarily for his aesthetic achievement as a picture maker, a landscape artist. Watkins's near invisibility for all those preceding decades now worked to his advantage: practically nothing about his work needed to be unlearned or reinterpreted.

As *Era of Exploration* made radiantly clear, Watkins's mammoth plate photographs **were** distinct from those of Jackson and O'Sullivan in both visual style and physical form. While his Yosemite work certainly documented the area's key motifs, it did so in pictorial terms clearly understood as both consistent and intentional. Watkins made information rich photographs that were valued for their artistry. This aesthetic refinement shaped his

process of production. His prints were large, elegantly crafted, and expensive. There were rarified *objets d'art*, intended for collectors and connoisseurs, not for home décor or geological files.

While Watkins undoubtedly sold individual prints of his Yosemite views, he was most interested in shaping them into coherent groups. As a result, much of what has surfaced in the past few decades comes from albums of roughly 25 to 50 prints each. These albums vary in content; it would seem that most were bespoke productions for wealthy and discerning customers. Thankfully, most of these heavy and expensive productions have been treated kindly over the years. Many of Jackson's pictures were displayed in homes and offices, while O'Sullivan's were usually placed in official and scientific reference files. Watkins's albums, on the other hand, were purchased and handled as elite collector's items. As a result, the prints within are often remarkably pristine.

This new attitude coincided precisely with the rise of the photography market: the buying and selling of original photographs for their rarity, beauty, and historical importance. A wide range of photographs were collected, for an equally wide range of reasons, but increasingly their *value* was a reflection of aesthetic criteria. This market grew almost exponentially in size in the decade from 1969, when the Witkin Gallery opened in New York City, to 1979, when the Association of Independent Photography Art Dealers (AIPAD) was officially incorporated. Auction world interest in photography grew at a similarly rapid rate in these years.

The universe of photography expanded almost explosively, in this era. It represented an amalgam (never an actual synthesis) of various factions: the existing realm of photographic antiquarians, as well as new communities of critics and scholars; museum and gallery curators; art historians who paid fresh attention to connections between the histories of photography and painting; the contemporary art world, which embraced photography as an essentially conceptual practice, for its immediacy and optical neutrality; and, finally, an ever-increasing audience of private collectors. Previously marginal figures such as Watkins, Gustave Le Gray, Paul Outerbridge, and others, were elevated to center stage in the medium's history. Innumerable other figures were given new attention. As a result, the field's standard histories were in a constant state of revision and expansion.

Carleton Watkins was central to this process—the discovery of his work played a decisive role in the expansion and maturation of the field. He is revered today for his unmatched artistic achievement. As this brief overview suggests, he is also key to our modern understanding of the medium itself.

Keith F. Davis
Sheridan, Wyoming
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¹ Van Wyck Brooks, "On Creating a Usable Past," *The Dial* (April 11, 1918): 337-341