

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Robert Silberman

book review of

Carleton Watkins: The Complete Mammoth Photographs by Weston Naef and Christine Hult-Lewis

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2014)

Citation: Robert Silberman, book review of *Carleton Watkins: The Complete Mammoth Photographs* by Weston Naef and Christine Hult-Lewis, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 13, no. 2 (Autumn 2014), <http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn14/silberman-reviews-carleton-watkins-the-complete-mammoth-photographs>.

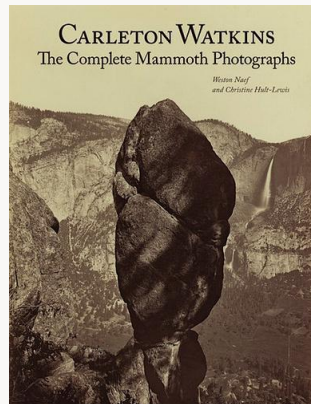
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](#) [Creative Commons License](#).



Weston Naef and Christine Hult-Lewis,
Carleton Watkins: The Complete Mammoth Photographs.
Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011.
608 pp.; 1,351 duotone images; bibliography; index.
\$195.00
ISBN: 978-1-60606-005-6

In 1975, Weston Naef and James Wood curated *The Era of Exploration*, an exhibition presented by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where Naef was Assistant Curator in the Department of Prints and Photographs, and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo, where Wood was Associate Director. The catalogue, subtitled “The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West 1860–1885,” was the first major consideration of the early photographers of the American West, some of whom accompanied survey expeditions led by Clarence King, F.V. Hayden, and George M. Wheeler.^[1] The images presented by Naef and Wood were, in effect, the prehistory of the work of Ansel Adams, who brought Timothy O’Sullivan’s photographs to the attention of his friend, the photographic historian Beaumont Newhall, when Newhall was the photography curator at the Museum of Modern Art.

Naef later became the first curator of photography at the Getty Museum in Los Angeles (he is now retired), publisher of this monumental volume on the mammoth photographs of Carleton Watkins. With his co-author, Christine Hult-Lewis, Naef has therefore brought his own involvement with the West full circle, with a catalogue raisonné that makes an important contribution to our knowledge of what Watkins achieved. The Western photographs of Watkins and his peers represent one of the great achievements in the history of photography, but not without controversy concerning a central issue. In a famous essay, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View,” Rosalind Krauss argues that the photographs were not made as aesthetic artifacts: they were made as scientific records of geological phenomena. They are, Krauss insists, most accurately described as “views,” not “landscapes.” She also maintains that the images, originally known as lithographic reproductions in geological publications or as stereographic views, were not meant for museum exhibition as prints. The

shift from science to art and from archive to museum therefore represents a shift in discursive space based upon “false history.”^[2]

That the Getty became a major collector of Watkins may testify to Naef’s shift of coasts and to a concern with a local, that is, California, hero. But it is also a consequence of the Getty policy of acquiring major photographers in depth based upon a primarily aesthetic perspective. The shift to an aesthetic emphasis was perhaps understandable given the enormous popularity of Adams (and others, including Edward Weston) and his emphasis on an aesthetic approach to Western landscapes, along with the development of the photography market and an expanded institutional base in art museums, epitomized by the Getty’s purchase in 1984 of two major private collections of photography. The Getty acquired the Arnold Crane collection and that of Sam Wagstaff for what then seemed fantastic sums and now seem fantastic bargains. The Wagstaff collection is reported to have been purchased for \$5 million and the Crane approximately the same. By way of comparison, in 2004 a single Steichen print sold for slightly less than \$3,000,000. In 1992 the Department of Photographs at the Metropolitan Museum became an independent unit, just over a half century after the formal establishment of the groundbreaking Museum of Modern Art department created by Newhall. At about the same time the Whitney Museum of American Art formally established a photography collection, and in 2006 the Guggenheim appointed its first curator of photography, playing catch-up in art historical and institutional terms and also in relation to the increased importance of photography in the art market.

The Getty now owns more than 300 Watkins images. What the proper approach to Watkins and other related photographers should be remains an open question. Watkins’ Yosemite images can overshadow his mining photographs, for example, and there are many challenges in trying to encompass the full range of his achievement and forms of presentation, from stereographic views to mammoth prints. Mary Warner Marien stated in 1993 that “All Watkins’ photography, including his spectacular views of nature, was commercial. . . . The surveys changed nature into property.”^[3] As a corrective, or what Marien tartly describes as “Rescuing Watkins’ photographs from their sleepy status as art objects,” it is important to attempt to comprehend the commercial aspects of his achievement.^[4] Watkins served business interests: his images were used for real estate promotion and occasional litigation over boundaries. He photographed the private mansions of the moguls as well as their mines, and at times he can seem almost like a corporate report specialist and high society portraitist. Not all was pure aesthetic contemplation of nature. Yet Watkins identified himself as a “landscape photographer” in the 1867 San Francisco directory, the first figure to use the term (Eadweard Muybridge followed him in adopting the designation). And he at times displayed photographs as framed artifacts presented in exhibition style, that is, on the wall, although that included both industrial exhibitions (such as the one sponsored by the San Francisco Mechanics’ Institute) and art gallery displays (such as at Goupil Gallery in New York City in 1863). Douglas Nickel, who curated a Watkins exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA) in 1999, concedes in his catalogue essay that to “even call Watkins an artist requires some qualification,” and challenges comparisons with Luminist painters or attempts to make Watkins a proto-modern. But the subtitle of the SFMOMA exhibition identifies Watkins with “the art of perception.”^[5] The stimulus for that phrase may have come from Naef, who remarked in 1996, “Watkins’s subject, for me, is the act of perception itself.” That statement, and other arguments made by Nickel, for example when he says, “Watkins’ vision of the West is in many respects railroad vision,” bring to Watkins and photography the kind of historically

informed yet theoretical approach to issues of technology, modernity, and perception found in Ann Friedberg's *Window Shopping*, with its notion of the mobile gaze, and in Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*, with its emphasis on optical devices and the process of perception.^[6]

Of the photographers touched on by Naef and Wood, some have remained secondary figures, such as William Bell. The primary figures include Muybridge, given added recognition by his motion study photographs and multi-part panorama of San Francisco and additional personal notoriety because of the fact that he murdered his wife's lover. Muybridge is the subject of a popular study by Rebecca Solnit that engages the quasi-theoretical issue of photography, time, and motion (and motion pictures) while also engaging in political commentary on the fate of the Indians in Yosemite—and their invisibility in the photographs.^[7] Timothy O'Sullivan has remained something of a mystery man because so little is known of his personal life and the absence of information fuels the ongoing debate over whether an aesthetic or topographic-scientific reading of his images makes more sense.^[8] William Henry Jackson, with his color chromolithographs and famous image of "The Mountain of the Holy Cross," remains an amiable, appealing figure, given credit for making pictures that spurred on the creation of Yellowstone National Park, as Watkins images did with Yosemite.^[9] But in photographic terms, that is, in terms of the actual landscape photographs, it is hard to resist granting primacy to Watkins and his mammoth photographs.

The early photographers and their images are important in the history of photography in many ways, not least their connection to parallel, if somewhat different, achievements in Europe. Watkins received a medal in 1867 at the Paris Exposition, an early example of international recognition, and his great presentation albums are comparable to the elaborate albums created by Edouard Baldus that documented the railway lines of France as commemorative gifts for royalty and railroad barons. Such grand productions are different from, say, a stereographic view of Yosemite that might be sent as a glimpse of the not-so-wild West to a relative back East for drawing room entertainment and edification. The miniature versions of the wonders of Western scenery, notwithstanding the magical charms of a stereographic 3-D effect, do seem tame beside the mammoth prints, even if scale is a relative, phenomenological guide rather than some map-like ratio of actual size to image size. A small version of a Watkins image may pale beside a mammoth print; but of course even the largest of the Watkins mammoth views or a complete version of the multi-image San Francisco panorama created by Muybridge cannot match the acres of canvas covered by Western painters such as Thomas Moran (one set for decades graced the Department of the Interior offices before being moved to the Renwick's grand salon). "Mammoth" is a relative term. The question of definition is not only verbal or technical, not simply a matter of physical dimensions (although I should note that the Watkins mammoth prints were made from 18" x 22" glass negatives). The size of the photographic prints and the scale of the photographic enterprise suggest economic, social, and political dimensions as well, because the survey expeditions functioned in part as a prelude to the exploitation of resources and an instrument of expansionist policies. Mammoth plates served what Albert Boime calls "The magisterial gaze," and what Angela Miller describes as "the empire of the eye."^[10]

Watkins made approximately 6,500 stereographic views. When the Getty book project began, with the aid of Peter Palmquist, author of the first major study of Watkins^[11] (who was to have

collaborated on this volume but unfortunately died at an early stage in the work), there were approximately 600 identified Watkins mammoth plate images. This volume identifies 1,273. A selection of only a few of these images would be impressive; any one of hundreds would be riveting in a gallery when seen beside other photographs or paintings. Center for Creative Photography archivist and scholar Amy Rule may have been right when she said at a Getty symposium that it took so long to establish Watkins' reputation "because no one really knew about the scope of his work."^[12] That is no longer a problem. At the same symposium, Palmquist said, "Watkins . . . stands today at the symbolic apex of all that is unreservedly grand about the American West of the mid-nineteenth-century," and Naef recalled how, "in 1980 approximately . . . I came to the realization that Watkins is the greatest American photographer before Alfred Stieglitz."^[13]

The staggering scholarly achievement of this volume matches Watkins' staggering photographic achievement. Building upon the earlier efforts of Naef, Wood, Palmquist and others, it is an exemplary catalogue raisonné. Exhaustive if at times exhausting in its detail, it provides important information for each image such as related stereo views and the location of prints. Its value is not diminished by the occasional appearance of those dreaded words, "present whereabouts unknown." In the accumulation of information and detailed commentaries, I noticed only a few minor slips, such as the identification of a "boom" as an area of water, rather than a barrier confining logs. But that was handled correctly in the appended note. The maps and other illustrations are informative, and although the volume is not a full-blown monograph, the critical introductions to the various sections are well written and at times manage to discuss formal and aesthetic issues as well as historical context and photographic background. The broader questions, of the aesthetic and the scientific or commercial, of photography and the other arts, of Watkins and Muybridge, and, in general, how to approach nineteenth-century photography—that forever fascinating challenge to conventional art historical thinking—are not miraculously solved by this publication. Yet it does offer a sound multi-faceted presentation of the Watkins photographs as an important test case, and by providing such a significant body of material including the critical commentaries, it offers an incisive demonstration of what is at stake.

If this epic effort is in the end immensely frustrating as well as immensely rewarding, that is because even with the full support of the Getty, the volume could only include small, if excellent reproductions of the mammoth images. The larger reproductions are of details only, even with several foldout panoramas.

The unfortunate, unavoidable question that must be asked about this impressive volume is therefore whether it should have been published at all. I love books, and major works of scholarship, especially one such as this collaborative effort that makes available a greatly expanded body of knowledge in a handsome, beautifully produced volume. With due respect to all involved, however, given that the images might be suitable for online presentation and that more images will presumably surface, why was such an expensive book produced? To serve research libraries? To serve the photography book market, one of the few surviving, even flourishing areas of publishing? Because the Getty has the resources? Because the train was moving and could not be stopped even in the face of the approaching alternative represented by digital databases? There is good reason to be happy the volume has appeared as a published work, bibliophilia aside. Cloud-based computing may prove not just cloudy but stormy;

existence in cyberspace does not entirely escape the problems of actual physical existence, and has problems of its own such as format-software shifts and unreliable storage platforms. What is the relationship between an original photographic print, a high quality reproduction in a book, a high resolution image on a screen, and a high quality digital print? The simple answer: complicated.

The situation is not likely to clear up any time soon. Still, excellent as this study is in so many ways, if it did not exist I am not sure there would be a compelling reason for such a project to be started today with a publication rather than a website as the intended outcome. Of course comprehensiveness and completeness would only be an ideal no matter what the medium. Naef acknowledges the problem and musters a defense when he says that as soon as the next discovery of an unknown image occurs, “this volume will no longer represent the complete mammoth-plate works, but it will nevertheless forever be a testament to Watkins’s vision and tenacity” (538). And, as Naef surely knows, to his own and that of his collaborators as well.

Robert Silberman

Associate Professor of Art History, University of Minnesota
silbe001[at]umn.edu

Notes

[1] Weston J. Naef and James Wood, *Era of Exploration: The Rise of Landscape Photography in the American West, 1860–1885*, exh. cat. (Buffalo: Buffalo Fine Arts Academy and the Albright-Knox Art Gallery; New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1987). Naef wrote the text, including the section on Carleton Watkins, except for the section on Timothy O’Sullivan, written by Wood, and an essay on Andrew Russell, written by Theresa Thau Heyman.

[2] Rosalind Krauss, “Photography’s Discursive Spaces: Landscape/View,” *Art Journal* 42 no. 4 (Winter 1982): 311–19.

[3] Mary Warner Marien, “Imaging the Corporate Sublime,” in *Carleton Watkins: Selected Texts and Bibliography*, ed. Amy Rule (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co, 1993), 26.

[4] Marien, 34.

[5] Douglas R. Nickel, *Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perception*, exh. cat. (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 20, 23.

[6] Nickel, 31; Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: October Books, The MIT Press, 1990).

[7] Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Viking, 2003).

[8] Toby Jurovics, Carol Johnson, et al., *Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy O’Sullivan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[9] Peter Bacon Hales, *William Henry Jackson and the Transformation of the American Landscape* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

[10] Albert Boime, *The Magisterial Gaze* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991); Angela Miller, *The Empire of the Eye: Landscape Representation and American Cultural Politics, 1825–1875* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

[11] *Carleton Watkins: Photographer of the American West*, exh. cat. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press for the Amon Carter Museum, 1983).

[12] In “Looking West: The Photographs of Carleton Watkins” [edited transcript of 1996 Getty colloquium] in *In Focus: Carleton Watkins* (Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 1997), 134. It was at the colloquium that Naef remarked, “Watkins’s subject, for me, is the act of perception itself” (136).

[13] “Introduction” to *In Focus: Carleton Watkins*, 5; “Looking West” in *In Focus: Carleton Watkins*, 136.