



Media only: Laura Baptiste (202) 633-8494
Mandy Young (202) 633-8529

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Media Web site: americanart.si.edu/pr

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Major Exhibition of Photographs by Timothy H. O’Sullivan Opens at the Smithsonian American Art Museum Feb. 12

“Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O’Sullivan” is the first major exhibition devoted to this remarkable photographer in three decades. The exhibition is on view at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., from Feb. 12 through May 9. The museum is the only venue for the exhibition.

“Framing the West”—a collaboration between the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Library of Congress—offers a critical reevaluation of O’Sullivan’s images and the conditions under which they were made, as well as an examination of their continued importance in the photographic canon. It features more than 120 photographs and stereo cards by O’Sullivan, including a notable group of King Survey photographs from the Library of Congress that have rarely been on public display since 1876. The installation also includes images and observations by six contemporary landscape photographers that comment on the continuing influence of O’Sullivan’s photographs. Toby Jurovics, curator of photography, is the exhibition curator.

“Timothy H. O’Sullivan is widely recognized as an influential figure in the development of photography in America, so I am delighted that we have partnered with our colleagues at the Library of Congress to present this new assessment of his work and to expose a new generation to his forceful images,” said Elizabeth Broun, The Margaret and Terry Stent Director of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

“In the years following the Civil War, the West was fertile ground for American photographers, but Timothy H. O’Sullivan has always stood apart in his powerful and direct engagement with the landscape,” said Jurovics. “Almost a century and a half after their making, his photographs still speak with an unparalleled presence and immediacy.”

O’Sullivan was part of a group of critically acclaimed 19th-century photographers—including A.J. Russell, J.K. Hillers and William Bell—who went west in the 1860s and 1870s. O’Sullivan was a

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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION MRC 970 PO Box 37012 Washington DC 20013-7012 Telephone 202.633.8530 Fax 202.633.8535

photographer for two of the most ambitious geographical surveys of the 19th century. He accompanied geologist Clarence King on the Geologic and Geographic Survey of the Fortieth Parallel and Lt. George M. Wheeler on the Geographical and Geological Surveys West of the 100th Meridian. During his seven seasons (1867 – 1874) traversing the mountain and desert regions of the Western United States, he created one of the most influential visual accounts of the American interior.

His assignments with the King and Wheeler surveys gave O’Sullivan the freedom to record the Western landscape with a visual and emotional complexity that was without precedent. His photographs illustrated geologic theories and provided information useful to those settling in the West, but they also were a personal record of his encounter with a landscape that was challenging and inspiring.

Of all his colleagues, O’Sullivan has maintained the strongest influence on contemporary practice. The formal directness and lack of picturesque elements in his work appealed to a later generation of photographers who, beginning in the 1970s, turned away from a romanticized view of nature to once again embrace a clear, unsentimental approach to the landscape. Observations about his images by Thomas Joshua Cooper, Eric Paddock, Edward Ranney, Mark Ruwedel, Martin Stupich and Terry Toedtemeier appear in the exhibition and the catalog.

About the Artist

O’Sullivan (1840-1882) was born in Ireland. He emigrated to the United States with his family at the age of two, eventually settling in Staten Island, N.Y. Biographical details about O’Sullivan are spare, yet he is thought to have had his earliest photographic training in the New York studio of portrait photographer Mathew Brady. He is believed to have accompanied Alexander Gardner to Washington, D.C., to assist in opening a branch of the Brady studio in 1858, and when Gardner opened his own studio in Washington in 1863, O’Sullivan followed. O’Sullivan first gained recognition for images made during the Civil War, particularly those from the Battle of Gettysburg, and 41 of his images were published in *Gardner’s Photographic Sketch Book of the War*. O’Sullivan’s experience photographing in the field helped earn him the position as photographer for King’s survey. After his survey work, he held brief assignments in Washington with the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Treasury. O’Sullivan died of tuberculosis on Staten Island at the age of 42.

Online Features

The museum will publish a podcast about the exhibition, available on its Web site as well as through iTunes, and an interactive map where users can click on specific locations to see the photographs O’Sullivan took there and get related information. A slideshow of selected works included in the exhibition also is available on the museum’s Web site.

Publication

A catalog, published by Yale University Press in association with the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, will be for sale in the museum store for \$60. It includes essays by Jurovics; Carol Johnson, curator of photography at the Library of Congress; Glenn Willumson, associate professor at the University of Florida; and William Stapp, independent scholar as well as a foreword by essayist Page Stegner, son of Wallace Stegner who was one of the West's best-known novelists.

Symposium

A symposium addressing issues of 19th-century Western exploration, photographic practice in the post-Civil War West, wet-plate photography in the field and the parallel tradition of landscape painting will be held Friday, April 9, from 2 to 7 p.m. Speakers include Jurovics and Willumson; Joni Kinsey, professor of art history at the University of Iowa; J.C. Mutchler, assistant professor of history at the University of Arizona South; and Mark Osterman, process historian at the George Eastman House. The program concludes with a panel discussion featuring photographers Ranney, Ruwedel and Stupich, moderated by Paddock, curator of photography at the Denver Art Museum. The symposium is free and open to the public; no registration is required. The program is sponsored by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and the Library of Congress.

Free Public Programs

Artist Cooper and Jurovics will have a conversation about O'Sullivan's photographs of Shoshone Falls and the photographs Cooper made of the same location Thursday, Feb. 25, at 7 p.m. in the museum's McEvoy Auditorium. Gallery talks by Jurovics will be held Thursday, Feb. 18, Wednesday, March 17, and Thursday, April 22, at 6 p.m. Details and complete program descriptions are available online at americanart.si.edu.

Credit

"Framing the West: The Survey Photographs of Timothy H. O'Sullivan" is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum in cooperation with the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. with support from the Robert S. and Grayce B. Kerr Foundation, the William W. Parker Fund, Paul Sack, the Bernie Stadiem Endowment Fund, Michael Wilson and the Smithsonian's Scholarly Studies Program.

About the Smithsonian American Art Museum

The Smithsonian American Art Museum is located at Eighth and F streets N.W., above the Gallery Place/Chinatown Metrorail station. Museum hours are 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily, except Dec. 25.

Admission is free. Museum information (recorded): (202) 633-7970. Smithsonian Information:

(202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Web site: americanart.si.edu.