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AMERICAN LANDSCAPES DEFINED THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS AT MUSEUM

AMERICAN LANDSCAPES, part of the continuing Springs Mills Series on the Art of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art, will open in the third-floor Steichen Galleries on July 9, 1981. The exhibition of some 55 photographs, drawn from the Museum's Collection, will be directed by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography, and will remain on view until October 4, 1981.

The photographs on view in AMERICAN LANDSCAPES, taken between 1854 and 1978, explore the changing concept and definition of the natural site. "We think of landscape pictures as an ancient genre," writes Szarkowski in his introduction to the catalog to be published in conjunction with the exhibition, "but it is in fact quite a modern one....It is possible to say that it is not until the end of the 18th century that the modern idea of landscape comes to flower."

Landscape painting in Europe at that time began to celebrate the "new sense of cordial intent between man and nature," Szarkowski says. The paintings "expressed the perception that the force of wilderness had been tamed a little...and had become a subject available to the lyric sensibility." In America, however, there was little landscape art, perhaps because there was little landscape. What America did have was wilderness which especially in the West was extraordinarily inhospitable to the traditional concept of pastoral beauty. From the artist's point of view, it was synonymous with chaos.

For the photographer the problem was even more difficult than it was for the painter, because the photographer was limited to what was in fact there.

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"The problem," writes Szarkowski, "was not solved but redefined by men who were not artists in the traditional sense....These photographers were, in varying proportion, explorers, adventurers, technicians, and entrepreneurs. Some were men of original artistic talent, but they had not been educated as artists and were therefore without conventional artistic ambitions." Thus in the last part of the 19th century a new and different tradition of landscape art arose in this country and was the beginning of a "continuing, inventive, indigenous tradition, a tradition motivated by the desire to explore and understand the natural site."

This, then, is the focus of AMERICAN LANDSCAPES. Among the earliest and most striking works to be included in the exhibition are the survey photographs of Timothy O'Sullivan, who had earlier photographed the Civil War. Beginning in 1867, he accompanied Clarence King and his exploration party to the Fortieth Parallel as a survey photographer. On these expeditions he functioned as half scientific technician, half publicist, yet the photographs he produced are notable for "their remarkable originality and formal beauty...simple, surprising, poised and full of force," writes Szarkowski. Other first-generation Western photographers to be represented in the exhibition are William Henry Jackson, John Hillers, F. Jay Haynes, Eadweard Muybridge and Carleton Watkins. Muybridge and Watkins, who photographed the natural wonders of the Pacific Coast which had already been discovered, acted more as memorializers than as explorers.

As the landscape was tamed, the concept of frontier changed, and toward the end of the 19th century a new genre of quasi-impressionist landscape photographers arose. Among them were Clarence White, Alvin Langdon Coburn,

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and a young Edward Steichen. Then, during the late 1920s, Edward Weston and Paul Strand began to photograph the "landscape's small parts -- a cypress root, a mushroom hidden on the forest floor -- and proceeded in steps toward the larger chaotic landscape, learning to describe progressively complex orders or order." Of the two, Weston followed the problem farther. "By the late 1930s, at the height of his powers, no space seemed too broad or too deep for him, and he made pictures of the large, complex world that are as clean and clear...as his early pictures of the landscape's fragments," observes Szarkowski.

The landscapes of Dorothea Lange and those of Alfred Stieglitz, dealing respectively with social truths and the "secrets of creation," will be on view. So, too, will the magnificent photographs by Ansel Adams of those corners of the American terrain that look much the same today as they did hundreds of years ago. Interpretive works by contemporary photographers Robert Adams, William Clift and Frank Gohlke will conclude the chronological survey of the American landscape. Each of the photographers in the exhibition has attempted to define what the earth is like and has presented new discoveries concerning the structure, the beauty and the meaning of our habitat.

An accompanying catalog, underwritten by Springs Mills, Inc., will be published in conjunction with the exhibition. It will feature 55 photographs from AMERICAN LANDSCAPES and an introductory essay by John Szarkowski. The book is being published by The Museum of Modern Art and will be distributed by the New York Graphic Society, Boston. \$14.95 clothbound; \$7.95 paperbound.

After closing at The Museum of Modern Art, the exhibition will travel to: The Worcester Art Museum, Worcester, Massachusetts (November 24, 1981 -

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January 3, 1982); Akron Art Institute, Akron, Ohio (January 23-March 7, 1982); Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas (March 31-May 9, 1982); The Gibbes Art Gallery, Charleston, South Carolina (July 1-August 15, 1982); The San Antonio Museum of Art, San Antonio, Texas (September 10-November 7, 1982); and the Chicago Public Library, Chicago, Illinois (November 29, 1982-January 9, 1983).

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For further information, please contact Luisa Kreisberg, Director, (212) 956-2648, or Pamela Sweeney, 956-7501, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019
