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Art in Review

Celebrating the American West: 19th-Century Mammoth Plate Photographs

Gitterman Gallery

170 East 75th Street, Manhattan

Through April 29

Working the west in the early days of photography, lugging large-view cameras and heavy glass plates, lensmen still had a field day, depicting awesome locales with an exactitude no painter could hope to achieve. This show focuses on three such pioneers.

"Yosemite Falls (From the Upper House)," taken in 1861 by Carleton E. Watkins, is the earliest photograph here. Watkins's Yosemite pictures are said to be the first American photographs to present nature from a deliberately aesthetic point of view. In this one, made on his first trip to Yosemite — and working with wet-plate negatives, which had to be coated with collodion and quickly exposed while damp — he closed in on the mighty falls sluicing down over bald rocks from behind a stand of trees, producing a masterpiece of depth and detail.

As the official photographer for the Yellowstone Park Improvement Company, Frank Jay Haynes gave the scenery around him its full due. Two views stand out. One, taken in 1887, shows the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone River and its falls, a majestic torrent boiling down between two mountains. The other depicts a bustling mining town of the late 1880's, location unknown, the photo leading the eye past a neat, almost modernist arrangement of sharply outlined houses and buildings to the smoking stacks of the mine operation.

William Henry Jackson, who had gone on expeditions for the United States Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories in the 1870's, worked for several railroads in the next decade, among them the Denver and Rio Grande. One of his pictures here, made for that line, is a frankly promotional shot of a beautiful No. 104 engine stopped on its track along the Sevier River Valley in Utah. Touting the fun and esprit of rail travel, the picture shows two girls who have left the train to pick flowers on a hill. A thin telephone wire stretching overhead shows that the area was by no means a wilderness.

Vintage prints all, these and other pieces by the three make for an arresting show.

GRACE GLUECK