

## **The photographs by Carleton Watkins at the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, University of California at Berkeley.**

The collection of the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley includes approximately 250,000 photographs. The earliest and oldest photos in the museum are mid-nineteenth-century prints produced for the United States federal western surveys by John Hillers, William Jackson, Timothy O'Sullivan, and Carleton Watkins.

Perhaps the best-known among these photographers is Carleton Watkins (1829–1916), who has recently been rediscovered as one of the finest photographers of 19th-century America. His pioneering work remains unsurpassed in its aesthetic sophistication and technical craftsmanship. In 1861, during his first trip to Yosemite, Watkins used a new mammoth-plate camera designed to expose collodion-on-glass negatives that were 18 by 22 inches in size, producing the largest photos ever taken in California. These large pictures not only brought him international fame but also were instrumental in persuading the United States Congress to pass legislation to preserve Yosemite Valley as a national park in 1864. From the 1860s through the 1880s, Watkins served as photographer for several expeditions of the California State Geological Surveys, capturing his award-winning views of the pristine and then barely known western landscape: its vast natural resources, rugged Pacific coastline and giant trees. In 1906, the San Francisco earthquake and fire destroyed the entire content of Watkins's studio, including his negatives. In 1910, consumed by illness and financial troubles, Watkins was committed to the Napa State Hospital for the Insane, where he died.

The museum founder, Phoebe A. Hearst (1842–1919), was a major collector of Watkins's work. In 1894, she hired him to document her estate in Pleasanton, California, but the photographer had to abandon the commission the following year due to his poor health. Mrs. Hearst's 140 photographs by Carleton Watkins in the Hearst Museum form the core of a collection of 400 photographs that she donated in 1904.

The museum's Watkins collection consists of 140 large-format (22 by 24 inches) mounted albumen prints of views of the western United States, including those of several national parks, Casa Grande pre-historic ruins in Arizona, scenes along the route of the Central Pacific railroad, views of San Francisco, and rare images of Monterey County. Many of the images are noted on their mounts as being from Watkins's "New Series," made after 1874. It is important to note that several of Watkins's prints in the Hearst Museum collection are the only existing copies that have survived the ravages of time, and thus they are in high demand.

The whole collection of Watkins prints is housed in the museum's storage facility located 2 miles away from the Berkeley campus and the museum proper. Access to the collection is therefore restricted. The museum received federal grant money in 2001 and hired two specialists who, along with the museum's object conservator, conducted detailed condition surveys of the entire media collections: audio, film and photography.

A three-week investigation concluded that cold storage was critical for the long-term preservation of these unique collections. Eight years after the condition survey, largely due to the economic hardship, the facility still lacks proper storage environment and furniture to house the photographs. The Watkins prints are stored crowded in a metal map cabinet. All of these photographs are on historic mounts, which in many cases have brittle corners. Most of the mounts are warped. Additional metal flat cabinets are therefore needed for the increased thickness of each image and safe handling. There is however no space to put any additional cabinets, even if the museum could afford them.

Those who have visited the museum know that its gallery space is very small, less than 4,000 sq. feet, and cannot display much of the museum's holdings. The photography collection is rarely displayed in that space. Rather, the museum has been sharing this collection with other institutions. Most recently, in June 2008, nine of Watkins's unique prints traveled to The J. Paul Getty Museum for a photography exhibition titled "Dialogue among Giants: Carleton Watkins and the Rise of Photography in California" (October 14, 2008–March 1, 2009). This loan was a great visual opportunity for the public to see these extremely valuable photographs. The prints also received appropriate conservation treatments at The Getty, such as overall surface cleaning, repair of tears and delaminations in the secondary support, and overall flattening. It can be said that these nine prints are very special.

It is hoped that in the near future the museum will receive financial stimulus to build a proper storage environment for its photography collections, including the Watkins prints. A new facility is urgently needed for the preservation of this significant portion of our cultural heritage. A lot must be done, however, before it becomes a reality.

Captions:



Fig. 1  
Carleton Watkins  
The Natural Bridge, Santa Cruz County, 1882-86

Albumen print  
Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology



Fig. 2  
Carleton Watkins  
Cypress Tree at Point Lobos, Monterey County, ca. 1883-85  
Albumen print  
Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology