PRIMITIVE CAMERA: ADAM CLARK VROMAN AND THE STATUS OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN LATE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Primitive Camera: Adam Clark Vroman and the Status of Photography in Late-Nineteenth-Century America

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From 1895 to 1904, Pasadena bookstore owner Adam Clark Vroman (1856–1916) made eight summer trips to photograph the landscape and indigenous peoples of the Arizona and New Mexico Territories. In Southern California, his contemporaries recognized him as a local photographer of note and an authority on Southwest Indian cultural practices. Vroman consolidated his distinguished national reputation by forming working relationships with the staff of the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology. The Bureau, established in 1879, was the key institutional proponent of social evolutionary theory in the United States. Adherents to the theory sought to map the development of the human mind as it evolved from the meanest state of savagery to middling barbarism and finally to fully realized civilization. The material cultures and social practices of the living indigenous peoples of North America were highly important to social evolutionary theory; they were cited as contemporary proof of the baser mental phases through which the civilized mind had long since evolved. Fully engaged with Smithsonian anthropology, Vroman endeavored to produce work relevant to the activities of the Smithsonian in the Southwest. These scientific aspirations fundamentally shaped his approach to picture-making, resulting in a body of work marked by directness,
precision, and detachment—aesthetic qualities that scholars, underemphasizing the actual causes, have cited as evidence of artistic exceptionalism on Vroman’s part. This dissertation proposes a significant shift and correction in our view of Vroman and his work. It demonstrates that although certain aesthetic aspects of Vroman’s art may now appear to be exceptional and forward-looking, his photographic practice was in fact fully embedded in, motivated by, and reflective of contemporary anthropological discourses. Moreover, Vroman’s association with the Smithsonian casts new light on the photographic literature of the time: It reveals the great extent to which that literature—both technical and critical—adopted the language of social evolutionary theory in an effort to prove the medium’s rapid evolution from a savage to a civilized art. This has important ramifications for our understanding of Vroman’s photography and its early reception. In contemporary photographic circles, the characteristics for which Vroman’s photographs are now admired were then understood as the hallmarks of an amateur. The amateur photographer was held responsible for the field’s developmental stagnation and was denounced, in social evolutionary terms, as a savage. Vroman was keenly aware of such characterizations, and he agitated against them. His attempt to balance the demands of science against an implicit aesthetic repudiation accounts for the extraordinary complexity and ambivalence of his work.

The first chapter uses Vroman’s photographs of the Hopi Indian Snake Dance to demonstrate that social evolutionary theory informed contemporary efforts to trace the origins of photography. Chapter 2 explores Vroman’s first collaboration with the Smithsonian. The chapter underscores a set of ambiguities that, from the start, characterized his photographic project. Most central was his amateur status in two
fields—photography and anthropology—that were quickly professionalizing. Chapter 3 expands on the uncertain future of Vroman’s photographic endeavors, addressing his status as a self-taught amateur operating outside the salon system. The chapter serves to demonstrate that, at the turn of the century, the amateur was held responsible for the field’s developmental stagnation and was rebuked, in social evolutionary terms, as a savage. Chapter 4 focuses on Vroman’s dogged pursuit of photographing desert clouds. As an avid reader of ethnologies of the Pueblo Indians, Vroman understood the significance of clouds to the Southwest’s indigenous peoples. Although in contemporary critical terms Vroman’s technique may have been decidedly primitive, his cloudscapes represent an unprecedented approach to landscape photography, one informed by Puebloan cosmology. The conclusion uses the insights gained from the case of Vroman to propose a new perspective on modernist photography in the United States. It considers whether post-World War I anthropology might be a useful theoretical tool with which to understand the development of modernist photographic discourses.
Acknowledgements

In recent years, I have had the good fortune to take archival and curatorial positions at the National Museum of the American Indian and the George Eastman Museum. That said, writing a dissertation while working full time was challenging. As dissertation advisor, Tanya Sheehan always provided the perfect balance of encouragement and incisive critical feedback to help me sustain and refine this project over the years. She was also crucial to the topic’s formation, for example suggesting early on that I explore the relatively untapped trade literature of photography, material now central to this dissertation’s arguments. Most importantly, Professor Sheehan consistently pushed me to answer that toughest of questions: So what? Endeavoring to formulate an answer has been empowering and has helped me to discover greater meaning in my work.

I am grateful to the Art History faculty at Rutgers for their ongoing interest in my professional development. I would particularly like to thank, in addition to Tanya Sheehan, Susan Sidlauskas and Andrés Mario Zervigón. Professor Sidlauskas has been a stalwart advocate for me and indeed was the first to suggest that Vroman might make a good dissertation topic. Professors Sheehan and Zervigón invited me to contribute an essay based on chapter 1 of the dissertation to their edited volume, *Photography and Its Origins* (2015).¹ I would also like to thank Emeritus Professor of History and American Studies Ann Fabian for agreeing to serve as the outside reader on my committee.

The central premise of my dissertation would have been much more difficult, perhaps even impossible, to formulate without access to the primary sources that

Vroman’s descendants generously made available to me. Clark Wiedmann and Cheryl Slyter sent me photocopies and scans of Vroman’s original letters and journals, and Michelle Thieling gave me digital reproductions of lantern slides and negatives. I also learned much about Vroman’s personal life through conversations and email exchanges with Clark and Cheryl.

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70. Figure 17 in A. Horsley Hinton, “Combination Printing,” The Photo-Miniature (Feb. 1904). Lithograph. Private collection.


On October 28, 1904, Pasadena bookstore owner Adam Clark Vroman (1856–1916) wrote a letter that signaled an end to his nine years as a distinguished photographer of the American Southwest. In general, the content of the letter is characteristic of Vroman’s side of his seven-year exchange with Smithsonian ethnologist Frederick Webb Hodge. As was his habit, he appealed to Hodge to send him copies of various Bureau of American Ethnology and National Museum reports. Vroman already owned the volumes he requested but reminded Hodge of his practice of separately binding all “matter on the Pueblos” and of his reluctance to “mutilate” his current set. Since 1895, Vroman had been an enthusiastic student of Smithsonian anthropology and consistently made careful study of institutional publications in order to know “what to do,” photographically speaking, in the field. Perhaps in exchange for the recurrent inconvenience, Vroman was ever amenable to sending Hodge prints made from his extensive collection of negatives and again offered to provide the ethnologist with anything “in [his] line.” He also informed Hodge of his summer photography trip to the Canyon de Chelly, where he had managed to make “a few good things” (Fig. 1). Astonishingly, and at odds with his stated intention to “go again & finish [up],” Vroman asked Hodge to assist with the disposition of his photographs:

My [Southwest] collection now runs upwards of 1000 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 [negatives], making fairly good showing. Santa Fe people say ‘best there is.’ When you come

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2 Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, October 28, 1904, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
3 Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, May 6, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
across someone who want[s] to buy it as a whole let me know. [I] also have 200 5x7 (Many Portraits) & 500 4x5 Film.\(^4\)

Vroman never found a buyer for his negatives and never returned to the Southwest.

From 1895 to 1904, Vroman made eight summer trips to photograph the landscape and indigenous peoples of the Arizona and New Mexico Territories. In Southern California, his contemporaries recognized him as a local photographer of note and an authority on Southwest Indian cultural practices. Vroman consolidated a distinguished national reputation by forming working relationships with the staff of the Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology. The Bureau, established in 1879, was the key institutional proponent of social evolutionary theory in the United States. Adherents to the theory sought to map the development of the human mind as it evolved from the meanest state of savagery to middling barbarism and finally to fully realized civilization. The material cultures and social practices of the living indigenous peoples of North America were highly important to social evolutionary theory; they were cited as contemporary proof of the baser mental phases through which the civilized mind had long since evolved. Fully engaged with Smithsonian anthropology, Vroman endeavored to produce work relevant to the activities of the Smithsonian in the Southwest. These scientific aspirations fundamentally shaped his approach to picture-making, resulting in a body of work marked by directness, precision, and detachment—aesthetic qualities that scholars, underemphasizing the actual causes, have cited as evidence of artistic exceptionalism on Vroman’s part. This dissertation proposes a significant shift and correction in our view of Vroman and his work. It demonstrates that although certain aesthetic aspects of Vroman’s art may now appear to be exceptional

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\(^4\) Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, October 28, 1904, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
and forward-looking, his photographic practice was in fact fully embedded in, motivated by, and reflective of contemporary anthropological discourses. Moreover, Vroman’s association with the Smithsonian casts new light on the photographic literature of the time: It reveals the great extent to which that literature—both technical and critical—adopted the language of social evolutionary theory in an effort to prove the medium’s rapid evolution from a savage to a civilized art. This has important ramifications for our understanding of Vroman’s photography and its early reception. In contemporary photographic circles, the characteristics for which Vroman’s photographs are now admired were then understood as the hallmarks of an amateur. The amateur photographer was held responsible for the field’s developmental stagnation and was denounced, in social evolutionary terms, as a savage. Vroman was keenly aware of such characterizations, and he agitated against them. His attempt to balance the demands of science against an implicit aesthetic repudiation accounts for the extraordinary complexity and ambivalence of his work.

Vroman’s Biography

Vroman was born in La Salle, Illinois, in 1856, to parents of Dutch descent. At the age of sixteen, he left home and a few years later secured a position with the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad. For about twenty years, he worked as an “operator,  

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5 The details of Vroman’s biography are drawn from eulogies and biographical sketches published after his death. Two eulogies appeared in the local newspaper were Elizabeth Grinnell, “The Passing of a Bookman, Pasadena Star News (July 26, 1916) and Theodore Coleman, “An Appreciation of A. C. Vroman, Pasadena Star News (July 29, 1916). On the day of Vroman’s death, the paper also published a rather lengthy obituary. See “A. C. Vroman Is Called by Death,” Pasadena Star News (July 24, 1916). Several years later, in 1923, a biographical entry appeared in volume three of History of Los Angeles County, ed. by John Steven McGroarty. The uncredited author of Vroman’s biography drew heavily from Coleman’s eulogy and the obituary to establish Vroman’s importance to Los Angeles. The author also provided the details of Vroman’s life, including birth date, work history, family members, etc. Scholars,
agent, train despatcher \[sic\] and ticket seller” at the company’s Rockford, Illinois, branch.\(^6\) In 1892, he married Esther H. Greist, who suffered from tuberculosis. The railroad granted Vroman a leave of absence in 1893 “for the purpose of taking his wife to California in the hope of benefiting her health.”\(^7\) The newlyweds relocated briefly to Pasadena, but Esther did not recover from the illness. Vroman soon accompanied her to Flora Dale, Pennsylvania, her place of birth, where she died in September 1894.

After Esther’s death, Vroman resigned from the railroad and returned to Southern California. In November 1894, he and stationer J. S. Glasscock formed a partnership and together opened a bookstore in the heart of the Pasadena’s commercial district, on 60 East Colorado Street. By then, Pasadena had for several years been known as “a well-equipped, fashionable resort…, built up by wealthy, refined, and cultivated people from the great cities of the East.”\(^8\) Although the city was a thriving cultural center, Glasscock and Vroman’s was its first bookstore of note (Fig. 2).\(^9\) The entrepreneurs offered Pasadena’s citizens not only a selection of high-quality books but also stationery, writing implements, leather goods, clocks, watches, and photographic equipment. In the weeks following their opening, at the height of the holiday season, Glasscock and Vroman advertised the store’s stock of “Kodaks and hand cameras from $8 to $95,” maintaining

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\(^7\) Ibid., n.p. The couple’s arrival was announced in the *Los Angeles Times* (November 5, 1893), accessed August 6, 2011.


that there was “[n]othing nicer for a Christmas present” than a camera.\textsuperscript{10} The bookstore continued to sell camera equipment; its function as a Kodak agency contributed significantly to the store’s early profits.\textsuperscript{11} After Glasscock and Vroman dissolved their partnership in 1901, Vroman became the sole proprietor and ran the store until his death in 1916.\textsuperscript{12} Vroman was remembered as one of the city’s “ablest business men and most revered citizens,” and his bookstore as “one of the large and important mercantile enterprises of Pasadena.”\textsuperscript{13} Rather than leave the business to his family, Vroman allowed for his employees to buy shares in the store, and for their loyalty Vroman bequeathed each with $100 for every year of service rendered at the store. “Vroman’s” bookstore is still a Pasadena mainstay.

Historical accounts paint a picture of Vroman as an extraordinary individual. Contemporaries admired not only Vroman’s entrepreneurship but also his character and intellect. He was remembered for his “love for all humanity,” and was said to have treated “the unknown laboring man with the same fine courtesy and consideration which he accorded to his associates among the intellectuals.”\textsuperscript{14} His friends included such luminaries as the naturalists John Burroughs and John Muir, and he was active in Southern Californian intellectual circles. Vroman “not only sold books, but also read them.”\textsuperscript{15} Through photography, writing, lectures, and conversation, he shared his extensive knowledge of the American Indians of Arizona and New Mexico and of the

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\textsuperscript{10}“Pasadena Brevities,” \textit{Los Angeles Times} (Dec. 23, 1894), accessed August 6, 2011.
\textsuperscript{11}Lawrence Clark Powell, \textit{Vroman’s of Pasadena} (Pasadena, CA, 1953), 6.
\textsuperscript{12}Allan Sheldon to M. R. Harned, August 18, 1916, private collection. Vroman’s doctors originally diagnosed him with pernicious anemia, but after his death an autopsy revealed cancer “everywhere.” Sheldon explained to Harned that the cancer appeared to have had its origins in or around the appendix, but that no one could recall Vroman ever having mentioned pain in the area.
\textsuperscript{13}“Adam Clark Vroman,” \textit{History of Los Angeles County}, 412.
\textsuperscript{14}Quoted in “Adam Clark Vroman,” \textit{History of Los Angeles County}, 413.
\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 413.
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history of the Franciscan missions of California. He was a founding member, in 1895, of Pasadena’s exclusive Twilight Club, a men’s dinner club with origins in New York City, meant “to cultivate good fellowship and enjoy rational recreation.” He regularly presented lantern slide lectures on topics such as the Hopi Indians and Japan to fellow Twilight members and to other area clubs, including the Friday Morning Club, the Ruskin Art Club, the Valley Hunt Dinner Club, and the Los Angeles Camera Club. In addition, he was a member of the Southwest Society and the Sequoia Club, served as the vice president and trustee of the Southern California Historical Society, and was appointed a corresponding member of the National Geographical Society. His name also regularly appeared in the published membership roles of the American Anthropological Association and the American Folklore Society.

To Vroman’s contemporaries, his “love of the beautiful in nature and art” distinguished his business endeavors from those of the ordinary merchant. He surrounded himself with objects demonstrative of “soundness and sincerity of workmanship,” evident in the “very cases and shelves” that adorned the walls of his store. Vroman’s activities as an art collector were also cited as evidence of his love of the beautiful. At the time of his death, Vroman’s eulogists noted that he had found some of his most remarkable treasures among the Indians of the Southwest; however, it was his Japanese netsuke that established his reputation as a collector of note, both locally and nationally. In 1914, as reported in the Pasadena press, Vroman invited a group of women to his private

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18 Vroman’s regional activities were regularly announced in the Los Angeles Times. For example see “News from Southern California Towns” (Dec. 17, 1898) and (Mar. 8, 1898); “Historical Society” (Dec. 3, 1901); “News and Business: Vroman’s Slides” (Nov. 23, 1901); and “Women’s Clubs: Ruskin Art Club” (Feb. 5, 1903), all accessed August 6, 2011.
apartments to “gloat over the rare and beautiful Japanese handicraft which for years
[Vroman] has been gathering in his trips abroad.” The collector recounted “legend after
legend” associated with each of the netsuke, dazzling his guests with a “valuable fund of
knowledge about all things Japanese.” Perhaps most impressive to Vroman’s guests was
that, four years before, the Metropolitan Museum of Art had acquired the larger part of
his netsuke collection.20 By then, in 1910, he had collected Japanese art for many years
and assembled around 2,500 netsuke, which he sold to philanthropist Margaret Olivia
Slocum Sage, who in turn donated them to the Met.21 In the museum’s Bulletin, Vroman
was credited with assembling the “finest” such collection in the United States, “rank[ing]
with the largest collections in Europe including the famous collection in the British
Museum.”22 Along with the netsuke, Sage presented eleven Navajo blankets to the
Metropolitan Museum’s Department of Decorative Arts. Of the eleven, she noted, a
number came from the “well known collection of Mr. A. C. Vroman, of Pasadena, and
others were obtained by me…at the Grand Canyon.”23 The demands of business drove
Vroman’s decision to sell the netsuke and some of his finest Navajo blankets. He wished
to buy property to expand his bookstore.24

Vroman’s contemporaries located his refined aesthetic sensibilities in the elegant
interior of his bookstore and the superiority of his art collections. Curiously, the ten-year

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21 In a 1910 letter to Sage’s representative, Vroman mentioned that he had collected netsuke for twenty
years; however, in a 1914 Pasadena Star News report he stated that he “began to take a fancy to [netsuke]
the first time I went to Japan,” which was in 1903. See Adam Clark Vroman to C. F. Holder, April 20,
1910. Office of the Secretary, Correspondence Files, 1870–1950, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives,
New York, NY, and Dubois, “Netsukes Hold Wonderful Charm.”
23 Margaret Olivia Sage to Robert W. de Forest, Secretary MMA, May 23, 1910, Office of the Secretary,
Correspondence Files, 1870–1950, Metropolitan Museum of Art Archives, New York.
24 Adam Clark Vroman to C. F. Holder, April 20, 1910, Office of the Secretary, Correspondence Files,
period in which he had established a reputation as an “artistic” photographer—from 1895 to 1904—merited only passing mention or none at all. For example, Theodore Coleman, author of the obituary published in the *Pasadena Star News* on July 29, 1916, noted that Vroman had “won fame” for the introductory text contributed to the 1913 edition of Helen Hunt Jackson’s 1884 popular novel *Ramona*, set in Southern California. In the 1913 introduction, according to Coleman, Vroman “told of his personal observations at the scenes where the story is laid, and threw entertaining sidelights on the author and her different characters.” Astonishingly, he failed to acknowledge the twenty-four half-tone plates derived from photographs by Vroman, which also appeared in the book (Fig. 3). Starting in 1895, Vroman had begun making photographs of Southern California haunts associated with Jackson’s novel; in 1899 he self-published the photographs as half-tone plates in *The Genesis of the Story of Ramona*. The 1913 edition of the novel was surely less remarkable for Vroman’s introduction and more so for the photographs that depicted locales Jackson had visited and portrayed in prose.

Vroman’s talent as a photographer had initially helped to establish his reputation as a Pasadenan of note, but, as Coleman’s eulogy, suggests that endeavor had been largely forgotten by the photographer’s death in 1916. Indeed, after 1904 Vroman deliberately abandoned the Southwest and subsequently withdrew his Southwest

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25 In “An Appreciation of A. C. Vroman,” Coleman mentions Vroman’s photography only briefly. Vroman, he wrote, “[b]y artistic photography, by printed words and by lectures and conversation…did a vast deal toward illuminating the annals of past times in the California he loved so heartily with colors true to life.” Nothing of the photography is mentioned in the eulogy written by Grinnell, the obituary, or later in the biographical sketch in *History of Los Angeles County*. Op. cit.

26 “A. C. Vroman Is Called by Death,” *Pasadena Star News* (July 24, 1916). Jackson intended the novel to serve as a popularized supplement to her non-fiction *A Century of Dishonor* (1881), in which she systematically documented the injustices experienced by California Indians. According to Vroman’s introduction, Jackson “wove into the story of Ramona” the incidents she had discovered during her investigations of the Mission Indians of Southern California and based her settings and characters on places and people she had encountered in her travels and research. See A. C. Vroman, introduction to *Ramona: A Story* by Helen Hunt Jackson (1913; Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1920), vi.
photographs from the intellectual activities of Southern California. In the spring of 1904, for example, Vroman had been elected chairman of the Southwest Society’s “special art committee” to consider “photographic matter[s].” Vroman’s chairmanship suggests an initial involvement in the activities of the Southwest Society, as does his pledge, drawn up by Lummis after a conversation with Vroman, to donate a “volume of [about 1800] platino prints” made from Vroman’s most important negatives.\(^27\) In early 1905, however, Vroman wrote to Lummis to request that his name be dropped from the Society’s membership rolls, adding “Don’t get the value of time & money.”\(^28\) Lummis sought persistently to retain Vroman. Vroman was unmoved. He wrote to Lummis in September: “I don’t see that I am to [be] benefitted $10.00 at this juncture & doubt if the effort will pay to donate the amount each year[,] so many societies is a burden. Let me die.”\(^29\) In fact, it appears the Society never received the Southwest photographs. Vroman turned his attention to Japan.

Vroman clearly regretted the ensuing indifference to his photography. On his deathbed, “wasted and worn,” he attempted to shore up his photographic legacy. He summoned the head librarian of the Pasadena Public Library to his side and directed her to his private rooms, where she would find

books of his collecting and in the beautiful bindings that he so loved to have placed on his own books. Those pertaining to California and the Pacific Southwest, together with his photographs, he wished to give the Library…. These were to form the Memorial Library, and for its continuance he made a

\(^{27}\) Charles Fletcher Lummis to Adam Clark Vroman, April 4, 1904, Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.

\(^{28}\) Adam Clark Vroman to Charles Fletcher Lummis, February 10, 1905, Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.

\(^{29}\) Adam Clark Vroman to Charles Fletcher Lummis, September 29, 1905, Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
bequest…the interest from [which was] to be used in the purchase of books and pictures of this land of the Southwest which he loved.\(^{30}\)

The books and photographs are still housed at the Pasadena Public Library. From the almost 2,500 negatives he had exposed between 1895 and 1904, Vroman had selected, printed, and bound hundreds of photographs in sixteen albums, which form the highlight of the donation. As Vroman had perhaps envisioned, in the early 1950s the albums facilitated the rediscovery of his photographs and prompted his canonization in the history of American photography.

**The Legacy Albums**

From the moment of rediscovery, scholars have struggled to define the nature of Vroman’s photographic work. In 1953, Vroman’s Bookstore commissioned Lawrence Clark Powell, the Librarian of the University of California at Los Angeles, to write a brief history of the store.\(^{31}\) In the course of his research, Powell encountered a reference to Vroman’s bequest of books to the Pasadena Public Library. He made an appointment to examine the collection, and it was then, he later wrote, “I learned that Vroman meant more than books.” Along with the books, the staff of the library furnished Powell with sixteen green morocco-bound and gold-tooled albums…of [photographs of] California and the Southwest…all of radiant beauty, evoking landscapes and landmarks…. Here were photographs to rank with the finest ever taken, technically advanced and artistically composed.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{31}\) See Lawrence Clark Powell, *Vroman’s of Pasadena* (Pasadena, 1953).

\(^{32}\) Lawrence Clark Powell, “Photographer of the Southwest,” *Westways* (Aug. 1, 1958): 12. For clarity, I have excised descriptive inaccuracies from the quote. Although Powell describes the prints as “mounted five-by-seven photographs of California and Southwest, taken in the late 1880’s through the early 1900’s,” neither are they mounted nor are they exclusively printed from 5 x 7 inch negatives. Vroman contact printed his 6 1/2 x 8 1/2, 5 x 7, and 4 x 5 inch negatives on 8 x 10 inch platinum paper and bound the sheets directly into the albums. The earliest photographs in the albums date from the winter of 1895.
Asking after the identity of the photographer, Powell was surprised to learn that Vroman had made them. Leafing through the albums, he was delighted to find photographs of the “California Missions before restoration, the pastoral beauties of Pasadena and Santa Monica when live oak trees were really live, the Ramona country of Riverside and San Diego counties, the splendors of Yosemite.” Initially, Powell may have been most intrigued by the photographs demonstrative of California’s Arcadian past, but, he noted, Vroman had dedicated a majority of the albums to photographs of Arizona and New Mexico. “I saw,” Powell wrote of those photographs, campsite compositions of such delicate perception as almost to exude the fragrance of piñon smoke. Here was the drama of climbing the Enchanted Mesa, of Navajo Gallo races with thundering overtones of the horses’ hooves, the mystery of Hopi dances, the humor of Vroman’s companions,…the noble character of individual Indian portraits, and over all the cloud-capped skies of the Southwest.

The photographs, Powell noted, also depict the Zuni, Laguna, Acoma, and Rio Grande Pueblo Indian villages and peoples, the Canyon de Chelly, and Inscription Rock.

Departing from the eulogists of 1916, who had emphasized Vroman’s contributions to American letters, the university librarian declared Vroman a “poet who used camera in lieu of pen.”

The poetry Powell perceived in the photographs can be attributed to the albums’ careful internal arrangement. The content and form of the albums underscore their significance to Vroman. To him, the album photographs represented the culmination of his photographic achievement (Fig. 4). Each of the sixteen gilt-tooled green morocco albums contains approximately one hundred leaves of platinum prints made from negatives produced between 1895 and 1904. The first fourteen albums consist of

33 Powell, “Photographer of the Southwest,” 12.
platinum prints made from 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 glass negatives with one image printed on each leaf; the prints of the fifteenth album (“C1”) are made from 5 x 7 glass negatives with two images printed on each leaf; and those of the sixteenth album (“D1”) are from 4 x 5 film negatives with four images printed on each leaf. The first five albums contain California subjects (Vroman’s numbering begins with zero; for reasons unknown, the number three is omitted from the sequence):

1. album “0”: Yosemite Valley / Congressional Library, 1900–1901;
2. album “1”: Pasadena California: A Club of Four, 1900;
3. album “2”: Pasadena, California, 1895–1896;
4. album “4”: California Missions: San Diego to Santa Barbara, 1897;
5. album “5”: California Missions: Santa Barbara to San Francisco, 1897.

The remaining albums are dedicated entirely to the photographs Vroman made in the Arizona and New Mexico Territories between 1895 and 1904 (here Vroman omitted the number thirteen from the sequence):

6. album “6”: The Hopi Towns of Arizona, 1895–1897, 1898;\(^{34}\)
7. album “7”: Zuni / Acoma Laguna / Enchanted Mesa, 1897–1899;
8. album “8”: The Rio Grande Pueblos / Taos to Isleta, 1899–1900;
9. album “9”: Santa Fe / Santa Clara / Gibollitta [i.e., Cibola] / Petrified Forest / Walnut Canon / Grand Canon, 1895–1899;
10. album “10”: Hopi Towns / Zuni / Acoma, 1900;
11. album “11”: Museum Gates Expedition, Arizona, 1901;
12. album “12”: Hopi Towns / Snake Dance, 1901;
13. album “14”: Arizona and New Mexico, 1902;

\(^{34}\) Album six also includes photographs made in 1901.
14. album “15”: *Canoñ [sic] de Chelly / Inscription Rock / Acoma, 1904;*

15. album “C1”: *Arizona / New Mexico / Portraits / Etc. / 5 x 7, 1895–1901;*

16. album “D1”: *Arizona and New Mexico / 4 x 5, 1895–1901.*

The numbering, arrangement, and descriptions of the photographs in each album demonstrate Vroman’s attempt to impose a narrative structure on the entirety of his photographic work. In a departure from tourist albums typical of the period, he instead sought to articulate his experience of the Southwest rather than to provide a visual documentation of his travels.

Vroman organized the photographs according to overarching themes—not according to a strict chronology. Over the course of his photographic activity, Vroman devised several numbering schemes for his negatives. For the purposes of compiling his albums, Vroman made a selection from his almost 2,500 negatives and re-numbered these negatives, often on the negative themselves, according to a twofold organizing scheme. The new numbers, which I will refer to as “legacy numbers,” indicated both the album in which the print appeared and the print’s sequence in the albums. Below each photograph, Vroman noted the legacy number and the year he made the negative. For photograph “No. 1001./ ‘00.,” for example, “1001” represents the negative number and “00” the year 1900. Moreover, all negatives or photographs with legacy numbers 1000 through 1099

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35 For example, after his first trip to the Southwest in 1895, Vroman numbered his 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 negatives “A100,” “A101,” “A102,” etc.; his 5 x 7 negatives “B1,” “B2,” “B3,” etc.; and his 4 x 5 negatives “C1,” “C2,” “C3,” etc. See the 1895 photographs in the Horatio Rust Collection, Huntington Library, San Marino, CA. He employed a similar approach to his 1897 negatives. He later re-numbered a selection of the 1895 and 1897 negatives. In subsequent trips to the Southwest, Vroman appears to have numbered his negatives in the order in which he made them; however, at some point most of his negative sleeves were discarded, making it difficult to precisely reconstruct his approach to numbering. The most complete listing of Vroman’s negatives is available at the Seaver Center, whose shelf list is derived in part from information transcribed from the sleeves. The few surviving sleeves at the Seaver Center suggest that the transcriptions are incomplete and inconsistent. See A. C. Vroman (1856–1916) Collection, Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, CA.
appear in album ten. (Likewise, legacy numbers 1100 through 1199 appear in album eleven, 1200 through 1299 in twelve, etc.) The legacy numbers assigned to the negatives and photographs do not necessarily reflect the order in which Vroman made them.

Vroman’s handwritten captions draw attention to the themes that guided the arrangement. Taken together, the arrangements and captions suggest an ambition to render a general sketch of a place. The captions in particular demonstrate the effort to minimize the specificities of the photographs in the service of an overall impression. In the captions, the details of the subject are ancillary to a guiding idea. With the exception of legacy albums eight, nine, eleven, and twelve, Vroman wrote captions under each photograph. Extant variants of those four albums, however, include captions by Vroman; the captions in the variant albums, particularly those in eleven and twelve, generally adhere to the approach Vroman used for the legacy albums.\footnote{Vroman made all of the negatives for the photographs in legacy albums eight, nine, eleven, and twelve during Smithsonian Institution sponsored expeditions. These expeditions are considered closely in chapter three of this dissertation. Now in private collections, the variants of legacy albums eight and nine were likely made soon after the close of an 1899 expedition to photograph the Rio Grande Pueblos of New Mexico. The photographs in these albums are numbered according to Vroman’s old numbering system. The variants of albums eleven and twelve are housed at Princeton University Library, Rare Books and Special Collections. The provenance of the two Princeton albums is unknown, but they are bound identically to those in the Pasadena Public Library. The content of the Princeton’s albums differ slightly from those in the legacy set. In 1901, Vroman made in-camera “duplicate” negatives during the so-called National Museum-Gates expedition on behalf of Peter Goddard Gates. It seems possible that Vroman made the Princeton albums for Gates. The Gates negatives are now housed at the Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.} The captions consist of two components: a general theme and a parenthetical note indicating a detail. For example, in album six, \textit{The Hopi Towns of Arizona}, Vroman began with a fifteen-photograph sequence entitled “On the Way to Moki Towns.” Each photograph in the sequence is accompanied by a parenthetical note identifying a locale, event, or encounter such as “(Our Party. ‘95’),” “(Twin Buttes),” “(Navaho Blanket Loom),” or “(Curio Room, Capt. Keam’s)” (Figs. 5–8). After “On the Way to Moki Towns” appears “Moki Towns,” a
sequence of sixty-four photographs arranged so that the viewer approaches, scales, and finally explores the villages atop the Hopi Mesas (Figs. 9–11). In the Hopi Indian villages, the viewer discovers young women grinding corn, children clamoring for candy, and Snake and Antelope clan members preparing for and observing the Hopi Snake Dance. In the remainder of the album, Vroman repeated the themes. Eight photographs again captioned “On the Way to Moki Towns” precede twenty-three classified “Moki Towns.” Now the viewer witnesses a Navajo Gallo race and the clouds adrift above the desert landscape before finding himself once more in the villages, where he is privy to the dressing of a girl’s hair, meets named Hopi individuals, and again observes a Hopi ceremony, the Niman Kachina Dance (Figs. 12, 72, 13).

In the conceptualization of the legacy albums, Vroman sought to harmonize his scientific approach to picture-making with his subsequent ambition to evoke an impressionistic vision of the Southwest. The way the captions are formulated subordinate subject matter to a leitmotif, but Vroman’s attention to both is indicative of a certain ambivalence toward his own work. He retrospectively asserted the artistic possibilities of the legacy album photographs while simultaneously maintaining their function as an objective transcription of nature. From 1895 to 1904, in Arizona and New Mexico, Vroman had made most of his photographs to serve the demands of ethnologists and anthropologists on the staffs of Smithsonian Institution’s Bureau of American Ethnology and National Museum. To that end, he had embraced the reproductive capabilities of the camera and marched in lockstep with critics who insisted that the medium was a “purely scientific and unfeeling art”—in other words, not fine art—and therefore incapable of appealing to the imagination.
In fact, Vroman was not alone in that struggle; a contemporary suggested a solution similar to the one Vroman devised for the albums. In an 1896 issue of American trade magazine *The Photographic Times*, British photographer F. C. Lambert considered the relationship between the imagination and photography. Lambert leaves aside the tedious question “is photography art?” and instead defines the expression of the imagination—evidenced by the presence of both personal feeling and the creative faculty—as the “one common quality” of all art. Observation and the close study of nature, he notes, are central to producing works of the imagination; however, photographers have been more “concerned in the word than the message”—they have favored reproducing the details of nature over producing an impression of nature. As a proper model for photographers and the use of detail in service of impression, Lambert recommends poets—“word-painters”—more than painters. “These artists,” he writes, are worthy of our most careful attention and painstaking study. In reading poetry most people (perhaps rightly) are content to go “straight through,” and be content with its general impression as a whole. The student, however, may profitably do more than this….the poet-student may most profitably study a poem, i.e., not only as a whole but in detail.

Presumably much like the vision ascribed to the camera, “the poet sees more than do most folk,” but it behooves the photographer to emulate the poet’s presentation of the observed facts in order to express feeling and stimulate the imagination. Lambert concludes that a detailed “study of nature is in no way antagonistic to the study of her as a whole, i.e., as an impressionist [sic].” Lambert’s conclusion calls to mind Vroman’s albums, where the photographer attempted to subjugate detail to broader impressions. It also underscores the difficulties Vroman faced in characterizing his work. Lambert was

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of course concerned with the impressionistic integrity of a single photographic work. Vroman relied on the selection, arrangement, and description of the entirety of his oeuvre to create the poetry that Lawrence Clark Powell praised at the moment of rediscovery in the 1950s.

**Vroman’s Ambiguous Canonization: The Historiography**

Powell may have recognized poetry in the legacy albums, but he ultimately disclaimed the impressionistic synthesis Vroman had so thoughtfully constructed. Although at first glance Powell had ranked the photographs in the legacy albums “with the finest ever taken, technically advanced and artistically composed,” in his final assessment, the images were less important for their interpretive and aesthetic achievements than for their informational value. The university librarian immediately set his mind to recovering all of Vroman’s original negatives, envisioning the production of prints from the negatives for the “UCLA and other libraries interested in documenting the Southwest.”

Powell’s pursuit of the negatives was soon encouraged by a chance encounter with Vroman’s friend and collaborator Frederick Webb Hodge, formerly an ethnologist at the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnology and now the director of the Southwest Museum in Los Angeles (currently the Autry Museum of the American West). (As mentioned above, in 1904 Vroman had asked Hodge to assist with the disposition of his collection of more than 1,000 Southwest negatives.) After Vroman’s death, Hodge recollected to Powell, the photographer’s niece had offered the negatives to the Southwest Museum, but the institution had inexplicably declined to purchase them; she soon found a buyer in Los Angeles County. With this clue in hand, Powell deputized a

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38 Powell, “Photographer of the Southwest,” 12.
member of the UCLA library staff to continue the inquiry. The negatives were soon located in the basement of the Audio-Visual Education Division of the Los Angeles County Board of Education. Before they had fallen out of use, the negatives had been used for didactic purposes; the Board of Education had produced a complete set of transparencies as well as sets of photographic cards organized by subject matter. In 1954, the negatives were recognized as historically significant and transferred to the History Division of the Los Angeles County Museum (now the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County).

The transfer of the negatives to the Natural History Museum prompted the publication, in 1961 and 1973, of the only two publications dedicated to Vroman and his photography—books central to Vroman’s canonization in the history of photography. Like Powell, staff at the museum were preoccupied with the evidentiary potential of the negatives. Ruth Mahood, Curator of the History Division, was responsible for the collection and served as editor of and contributor to the 1961 Photographer of the Southwest. Mahood’s essay recounts her part in the rediscovery of the negatives and provides an overview of Vroman’s photographic activities in California, Arizona, and New Mexico, placing particular emphasis on his field work for Hodge (and therefore the Smithsonian) in New Mexico in 1897 and 1899. Mahood also mentioned the museum’s first Vroman exhibition (1958), which consisted of “eighty-five sepia reproductions chosen from the negatives of the [California] missions and of Yosemite.” In 1960, the museum opened a gallery dedicated to the display of sepia-toned, glossy gelatin silver copy prints from the Vroman negatives. The aim was to “afford the public the

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39 Some of these cards are now in the collection of the Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA. See for example P.38325a, P.38300, P.38308a, P.38319b, and P.38334a.
opportunity of enjoying the majority of the large number of photographs and the variety of subject matter the collection contains.”41 Made by William Webb, such copy prints were also used for the reproductions in Mahood’s book, despite the acknowledged fact that most of Vroman’s surviving prints were, like those in the legacy albums, platinum prints. Unlike gelatin silver, the platinum process produces a soft, matte print with a remarkable tonal range. The interpretive framework Vroman had imagined for his work—the selection, organization, description, and choice of the costly but expressive platinum process—had become secondary to the images recorded on the negatives.

Beaumont Newhall, then the director of the George Eastman House, contributed the introduction to *Photographer of the Southwest*. Situating Vroman within the history of American photography, Newhall sought to demonstrate Vroman’s exceptionalism among his peers. Vroman photographed in a post-frontier West, overrun with Kodak-toting tourists who, “in their greed to get pictures,…changed the life of the Indian by paying him to pose and making him so self-conscious that he even changed his ceremonies.”42 Although Vroman had used the same strategies and aggressively inserted himself in the midst of ceremonies, in Newhall’s account the photographer was a friend to the Native individuals he photographed and “never forgot to bring them promised prints.” Whereas Vroman’s contemporary and acquaintance George Wharton James made portraits of Natives that were intentionally comical or verged on the grotesque, Vroman made “portraits of personalities…, [of] individuals, not characteristic types.”43 Moreover, though he was an Eastman Kodak dealer, Vroman chose to work predominately with a

43 Ibid., 13.
traditional view camera, which allowed him to “record the richness of detail needed to give his photographs value as documents.” As a result, his photographs were “sharp, precisely focused, fully realized.” In this, Vroman served Newhall as a foil to Edward S. Curtis, who had begun to photograph the Native people of the Southwest around the same time Vroman finished his work in the region. Vroman’s direct approach to photographing the Southwest—a task made more difficult because the customs of the region’s indigenous peoples were “dying”—was unsentimental and avoided “the obvious.” To underscore Vroman’s superior approach, Newhall compared but did not reproduce images each photographer had made in the Canyon de Chelly in 1904:

The styles of these two photographers are vividly defined in the photographs which each took of the same great wall of the Cañon de Chelly. Both included human figures to emphasize its thousand-foot height. Vroman chose to include the wagon which had brought him and his companions to the scene. He chose a time of day when the light shone full upon the great rock wall. Curtis shows mounted Indians walking their horses in single file into the setting sun, which grazes the cliff, throwing most of it in shadow.

Taking full advantage of the light of the desert, Vroman made a direct, formal study of the wall, without contrivance; the precision of Vroman’s photograph gives way to the diffuseness of Curtis’s. (For example see figures 14 and 15.) Curtis suppressed the precision afforded by the camera in order to convey a sentimental scene of a “vanishing race.” More to the point, Vroman rejected the pictorialist approach Curtis would adopt for his ambitious thirty-year project to photograph the Native peoples of North America.

The insistence on a Vroman who “liked his photographs sharp, precisely focused, fully realized” allowed Newhall to overlook, even embrace, Mahood’s decision to illustrate Photographer of the Southwest with reproductions of gelatin silver prints made

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44 Ibid., 17.  
46 Ibid., 18.
by Webb from the museum’s negatives. Above all, Vroman served as an intermediary figure in Newhall’s effort to trace an art history of the medium, both in Mahood’s 1961 publication and, later, though to a lesser extent, in the fourth edition of his landmark *History of Photography*, published in 1964. The aesthetics afforded by the glossy copy prints in particular allowed Newhall to use Vroman as a fulcrum between past and present.\footnote{See ibid., 10.} According to Newhall, the photographer continued the fieldwork undertaken on the frontier in the late 1860s and 1870s by federal survey photographers Timothy O’Sullivan, John Hillers, and William Henry Jackson, and he “anticipated the direct, precise, and sensitive styles of such twentieth-century photographers as Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.”\footnote{Ibid., 9. Later in the essay, Newhall adds Paul Strand to the list of photographers whom Vroman “presaged.”} While acknowledging that Vroman printed on platinum paper, a “beautiful material” that produced “images of great delicacy, with a long range of tones in the middle greys,” Newhall justified the gelatin silver reproductions by noting that they demonstrated Webb’s—not Vroman’s—appreciation of the “tradition of ‘straight photography’ of the nineteenth-century pioneers and of those twentieth-century photographers who formed an esthetic based upon the simplest and most direct use of the camera.”\footnote{Ibid., 16–17.}

“Straight” or pure photography was advocated not only by Newhall but by Weston and Adams, photographers Newhall identified as Vroman’s aesthetic successors. The two modernists were charter members of Group f.64, a collective of young photographers who in 1932 had rejected the Pictorialists’ devotion to art principles
associated with painting and printmaking. Photography, the group declared, would now be an art form by simple and direct presentation through purely photographic methods. The Group will show no mark at any time that does not conform to its standards of pure photography. Pure photography is defined as possessing no qualities of technic, composition or idea, derivative of another art form.\textsuperscript{50}

Weston and Adams emphasized the finished photographic print as the expressive culmination of these radical new principles. Moreover, they argued that the precision inherent in the medium was best communicated through the hard lines and glossy finish afforded by processes such as gelatin silver. Vroman’s preferred platinum process softened the otherwise rigid contours of his subject matter. Fundamentally, Webb’s gelatin silver prints represented an interpretation or re-envisioning of Vroman’s photographs. These copy prints allowed Newhall to position the photographer as a proto-modernist.

Although Newhall placed Vroman within a developmental framework of American art photography, he ultimately deemed Vroman not an artist but a documentarian who made photographs “primarily for their informational value.”\textsuperscript{51} In \textit{Dwellers at the Source} (1973), the second of the two book-length publications on Vroman, Robert Weinstein took issue with Newhall’s assessment.\textsuperscript{52} To Weinstein,

\textsuperscript{50} Quoted in \textit{Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography}, ed. by Therese Thau Heyman (Oakland, CA: Oakland Museum of Art, 1993), 53. The manifesto accompanied the group’s inaugural exhibition at the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum in San Francisco.


\textsuperscript{52} Like the reproductions in \textit{Photographer of the Southwest}, those in \textit{Dwellers at the Source} were made after prints executed in a process not favored by Vroman. The prints were collodion copy prints that Webb made from original negatives housed primarily in the collections of the Natural History Museum and the Southwest Museum (now the Autry National Museum of the American West). In an appendix, Webb and Weinstein confessed to taking “many liberties with cropping,” having felt “justified in this practice since now and then we think we have come up with a stronger composition.” See William Webb and Robert A. Weinstein, \textit{Dwellers at the Source: Southwestern Indian Photographs of A. C. Vroman, 1895–1904} (1973; Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 209.
Vroman’s photographs were visually informative but more than a “compilation of data.” Vroman was committed to “the recording of something of beauty.” Weinstein’s Vroman was a visionary “genius” who rejected Pictorialism and independently forged an “aloof,” “straight photographic style” which captured the essence of subjects. According to the author, Vroman’s genius revealed itself in 1897, during the photographer’s second trip to the Arizona and New Mexico Territories. Then Vroman “elevated” the camera from its former role as “an instrument that merely records” and instead began to make dynamic compositions that “enhanced the emotional impact of content.” Nowhere is that more evident than in his portraits of indigenous people.

Weinstein identified Vroman as a photographer who placed little importance on his status in the field of photography. As this dissertation demonstrates, however, Vroman was in fact eager to promote his photographs and vacillated between producing scientific and art photographs. By dismissing intended functions of Vroman’s photography, Weinstein dislodged Vroman from the context in which he practiced. Newhall and Mahood had emphasized Vroman’s deep sympathy for Native people, but for Weinstein, Vroman was a crusader who sought to illustrate the “plight of his Indian friends.” In this way, Vroman’s portraits represent his ambition to communicate the valiant struggle of indigenous people to “preserve some shred of human dignity while victims of an oppressive conqueror.” The compositions Vroman devised for his portraits were intended to depict a “people strong, vigorous, proud, eternal,” inspiring in Weinstein an anachronistic—and in the case of Vroman incorrect—metaphysical reading.

54 Ibid., 25.
55 Ibid., 17.
of the kind Christopher Cardozo has more recently applied to the work of Curtis.\textsuperscript{56} The portraits move the viewer to recognize not necessarily a common humanity but a common spiritual source:

More mysteriously, here are people who are knowable to us…. [P]erhaps we have always known them! Our response arises from our own deepest natures as we gaze upon these reflections of a people still in reverent communion with the earth. We discover that their humanity is, after all, our own. They are the dwellers at the source from which we all came and to which we shall one day return. The identity is complete.\textsuperscript{57}

Weinstein’s disavowal of Vroman’s professional ambitions left little recourse but to read the photographs, contrary to the claims he had made for Vroman’s work, as conveyers of, to repeat Newhall, “visual information.”\textsuperscript{58} For example, in his section on Vroman’s photographs of the Hopi Indian Snake Dance, Weinstein assumes the role of ethnologist or ethno-historian. He uses the images as illustrations to describe various components of the ceremony, to distinguish between the observances of the ceremony in each village, and finally to elucidate or interpret the ritual significance of objects or gestures depicted.

Weinstein also overlooked historical complexity in favor of presenting Vroman as an unassailable champion of Native people. In the section on the Zuni photographs, he notes in Vroman’s portraits of Zuni Governor Marmon that the sitter wore his hair long. “Long hair,” the author wrote, “among most of the Pueblo people signifies initiation into one or more of the religious societies and may not be worn until a man has been properly

\textsuperscript{57} Webb and Weinstein, \textit{Dwellers at the Source}, 25.
\textsuperscript{58} Here, Weinstein’s approach is consistent with a number of histories that consider photographs of American Indians. See for example Patricia Janis Broder, \textit{Shadows on Glass: The Indian World of Ben Wittick} (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990).
ordained." This ethnographic description is followed by a woefully, perhaps willfully, incomplete account of Vroman’s involvement in a scandal at Oraibi, a Hopi village on Third Mesa. In 1903, Vroman exchanged a series of angry letters with Indian Agent Charles Burton. Vroman had sold photographs in Los Angeles in order to collect money for the support of Oraibi drought victims. He condemned Burton for refusing to distribute the funds to Oraibi men who had disobeyed Burton’s order to cut their hair. (Eventually, Burton instituted a policy of forced haircutting.) At the time, more so than the villages on First and Second Mesas, Oraibi was the scene of violent encounters between Oraibi traditionalists and American interlopers and their Oraibi allies. Weinstein does not mention that Vroman’s friend Charles Fletcher Lummis made the injustice national news or that Vroman permitted Lummis to illustrate as series of articles, “Bullying the Quaker Indians,” with photographs he had made in Oraibi in 1902 (Fig. 16). More significantly, Weinstein neglected to recount Vroman’s own admission in a letter to Burton that it was his policy to “[keep] out of all controversies on the situation of the Hopi although I have much sympathy for these people.” Vroman not only avoided all controversy but also neglected to make photographs revelatory of the brutality and upheaval that then characterized life in the village.

59 Webb and Weinstein, Dwellers at the Source, 123–124.
61 See Charles Fletcher Lummis, “Bullying the ‘Quaker’ Indians,” Out West 18, no. 6 (June 1903): 668–690; 19, no. 1 (July 1903): 43–56; and 19, no. 2 (Aug. 1903): 171–175. For the purpose of illustrating his articles, Lummis requested that Vroman send him “a lot of the Moqui pictures of themselves, particularly of Oraibe and particularly those which will show attractive personal types and domestic scenes and children? I want to prove by the pictorial witnesses to a careless public that these are not the people to be herded and driven like cattle and there is nothing in the world which goes so far in a plea of this sort as a photograph of the Moquis as they really are.” Lummis to Adam Clark Vroman, March 31, 1903, Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
62 Adam Clark Vroman to Charles Burton, February 21, 1903, Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
In *On Photography* (1973), published in the same year as *Dwellers at the Source*, Susan Sontag examined the unsentimental aloofness that both Newhall and Weinstein admired in Vroman’s work. Criticizing the moralistic, propagandistic, and bourgeois tendencies in American documentary photography, Sontag cited Vroman’s “unexpressive, uncondescending, unsentimental” approach to photography as comparable to that of German photographer August Sander.\(^{63}\) To Sontag, Sander approached documentary photography in a scientific, as opposed to moralistic (i.e., American), way. With cool detachment, Sander sought to “shed light” on the German social order of the 1920s by creating a broad visual taxonomy of the upper, middle, and lower classes.\(^{64}\) The difference between the two, Sontag argued, was that “Sander didn’t know he was photographing a disappearing world. Vroman did. He also knew that there was no saving the world that he was recording.”\(^{65}\) Vroman “made no propaganda for Indians”—in other words, his was perhaps an atypical American documentary project—but Sontag did count him among the “predatory” hordes whose photographic pursuits fundamentally altered American Indian life.\(^{66}\) The “predatory” approach to documentary photography produced the same result as the “hopeful” approach of a photographer like Jacob Riis: both altered what they photographed. Arguably, for Sontag, Vroman helped to destroy traditional American Indian ceremonies, while Riis aided in the destruction of the Mulberry Bend slums but did not appreciably change the lives of its inhabitants or of the inhabitants of equally squalid slums.\(^{67}\) As Sontag suggested, Vroman was not a traditional documentary photographer; he did not set out to expose or eradicate social inequality or injustice. Also,

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\(^{64}\) Ibid., 60.
\(^{65}\) Ibid., 62–63.
\(^{66}\) Ibid., 62 and 64.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., 63–64.
her concise analysis is among the few to acknowledge and address the complexities of Vroman’s work. Moreover, she anticipated approaches Native scholars would take in their assessments of Vroman (see chapter 1). However, Sontag’s unflattering portrayal gained little traction in the field.

The arguments at the center of *Photographer of the Southwest* and *Dwellers at the Source* continue to reverberate in the critical reception of Vroman’s photography. With the important exception of Sontag, Vroman’s unsentimental approach to photographing Native people has disarmed scholars. In a 1981 article, for example, Martha Rosler compared Curtis’s influential photographs, with their “repulsively contorted” sentimental pictorialism, to those of Vroman. “Personally,” Rosler wrote, “I prefer the cooler, more ‘anthropological’ work of Adam Clark Vroman” to the more artistic work of Curtis. In fact, Vroman’s approach to picture-making cannot be merely characterized as “anthropological” in hindsight; it was intentionally anthropological. Vroman was an enthusiastic student of American anthropology and endeavored to make photographs relevant to the scholarship of Smithsonian anthropologists and ethnologists. As such, he subscribed to the social evolutionary tenants of the American school of anthropology—which understood North America’s indigenous peoples as “primitive,” as occupying a “savage” or “barbaric” state of culture. Likewise, Vroman was an active participant in “salvage anthropology” and “salvage ethnology”—the effort to preserve cultural practices thought to be destined for extinction by systematically collecting material

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culture and textual and visual data. Compared to Curtis, who, it is worth noting, considered himself an ethnologist and his photographs ethnographic, Vroman’s photographs are perhaps not obviously “contorted,” but they are no less informed by the discourses that also animated Curtis’s work.

In 2009, Eva Respini described Vroman’s photographs as “neither romantic, nostalgic, nor ethnographic” but “straightforward and respectful descriptions of the communities and families he met during his travels.” With that, she summarized decades of historiography on the photographer. Her assessment underscores the difficulty scholars have had in defining and contextualizing Vroman’s photography. Concerning that ambiguity, Jennifer Watts rightly located Vroman’s photographs

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“betwixt and between” science and art, noting that they have become “unmoored from the circumstances of their creation.”  

The ambiguity identified by Watts was central to the nature of Vroman’s photographic practice, and it is only partially the result of an inadequate understanding of Vroman. Indeed, my research reveals that the ambiguity was inherent to the contemporary discourses that must be used to contextualize Vroman’s photographs. Vroman was caught between and was to some extent aware of a series of contradictions that plagued his photography: art versus science, amateur versus professional, savage versus civilized. To attempt to resolve these ambiguities and contradictions would be to miss the point. As I wish to show, they shaped American photographic practice and theory at the end of the nineteenth century.

To this end, I take John Tagg’s definition of the photograph as a starting point. He famously argued that the photograph is “a material product of a material apparatus set to work in specific contexts, by specific forces, for more or less defined purposes.” For him, photography requires a history that considers “the conscious and unconscious processes, the practices and institutions through which the photograph can incite a phantasy, take on meaning, and exercise effect.” Attentive to Vroman’s scientific ambitions, my dissertation reveals the context of his photography in turn-of-the-century anthropological discourses and, in doing so, elucidates the extent to which the field of photography drew upon those discourses to imagine the medium’s developmental potential.

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74 Tagg, The Burden of Representation, 4.
Likewise, the dissertation builds on the premise of Robin Kelsey’s *Archive Style* (2007), which contextualizes the federal survey photographs made in the late 1860s and 1870s by Timothy O’Sullivan. Kelsey is particularly interested in forging a middle ground between scholars like Beaumont Newhall who defined the photographer as an early “intuitive” modernist; Rosalind Krauss who denied any “distinctiveness” in O’Sullivan’s work; and Joel Snyder who “sidestepped the debate” by maintaining that the photographer worked within the aesthetic conventions of nineteenth-century landscape art. Kelsey instead accounts for O’Sullivan’s style by exploring the unprecedented instrumentality of the federal surveys, which he argues demanded pictorial invention and experimentation. As Kelsey does for O’Sullivan, I am interested in accounting for Vroman’s approach to photography (which includes aesthetics) by deeply contextualizing his work in a specific historical moment.

**Methods**

To unearth hitherto overlooked contexts of Vroman and his work, I consulted a variety of period sources, including photograph and archival collections, ethnographic and anthropological studies, photographic trade periodicals, and popular books and magazines in which Vroman’s images appeared. Photographic materials in several collections—the Huntington Library, the Braun Library of the Autry Museum of the American West, the Smithsonian Institution National Anthropological Archives (NAA), and the Seaver Center for Western History Research at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County—proved important for determining not only the extent of Vroman’s

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body of work but also his printing and dissemination practices during the period of his activity in the Southwest. Moreover, the content of those collections underscored to me the centrality of the legacy albums at the Pasadena Public Library, which are fundamental to understanding Vroman’s assessment of his own work. For the most part, Vroman circulated and published only those images he would later select for inclusion as platinum prints in the legacy albums. In short, he was a discriminating editor of his work. Likewise, although Vroman distributed gelatin silver prints to his acquaintances, from the start he printed most often on platinum paper and used the expensive medium even for test prints to send to acquaintances. Indeed, the legacy albums contain only platinum prints; the process is key to understanding Vroman’s work. Therefore, my examination of Vroman relies heavily on the legacy albums and on halftone reproductions that he selected to appear in contemporary publications and that exposed a national audience to his work.

Archival sources—particularly those at the Autry, the NAA, and in the private collections of Vroman’s descendants—made clear that Smithsonian scholarship significantly influenced Vroman’s photographic aspirations. He served three times as field photographer for the institution, twice in collaboration with ethnologist Frederick Webb Hodge. Hodge and Vroman corresponded frequently between 1897 and 1904. The archival record revealed that, at the same time, Vroman also strove to gain the recognition of Smithsonian stalwarts such as Jesse Walter Fewkes, William H. Holmes, Otis T. Mason, and William John McGee, in large part by trying to make photographs that were relevant to their work. In addition, the correspondence indicated that Vroman systematically assembled a personal library of Smithsonian ethnological and
anthropological reports. He was particularly keen to collect studies on Pueblo Indians. Given Vroman’s clear interest in Smithsonian anthropology, I examined contemporary reports published by the institution as well as histories dedicated to turn-of-the-century American anthropology. The intellectual content of Bureau of American Ethnology publications demonstrated that Vroman sought out subject matter relevant to the activities of the Smithsonian in the Southwest. Moreover, the visual content—most particularly the photography of the Snake Dance—informed his approach to picture making. All this suggested that Vroman had thoroughly absorbed social evolutionary theory—the theoretical foundation of Smithsonian anthropology. It therefore became a central thesis of my research that social evolutionary theory provides a suitable framework for interpreting Vroman’s understanding of his work. Additionally, the concept casts new light on contemporary photography criticism in general.

Smithsonian anthropology and social evolutionary theory may have shaped Vroman’s photographic practice, but what did that mean in the larger context of American photography? How was Vroman’s work received and understood in photographic circles? Because Vroman, as an amateur, worked outside the salon context, I turned not to well known photographic journals such as the New York Camera Club’s Camera Notes (1897–1903), edited by Alfred Stieglitz, but instead to trade magazines such as The American Annual of Photography and Photographic Times, The American Journal of Photography, Photo Era, The Photo-Miniature, Camera Craft, and The Photographic Times. Also informative were manuals written for an amateur audience and issued between 1895 and 1905.
In those understudied sources I discovered that Vroman’s contemporaries borrowed the language of social evolutionary theory not only to account for what they identified as photography’s developmental stagnation but also to imagine the medium’s potential. In explicit social evolutionary terms, they positioned photography between two stages of evolutionary development. Photography was on the one hand a civilized technology and on the other a savage art. Moreover, contemporaries held the amateur responsible for the field’s stagnation. The amateur circa 1900 had fallen from grace. He was no longer the gentleman amateur who had facilitated photography’s technical development.\textsuperscript{76} Instead, he was tainted by an approach to photography that was, according to social evolutionary theory, decidedly primitive.

My observation allows me to position Vroman’s work within a contentious debate regarding the future of photography and represents an intervention in the extensive secondary literature on the relationship between anthropology and photography. In the introduction to the influential volume \textit{Anthropology & Photography, 1860–1920} (1992), Elizabeth Edwards defined two contexts by which she argued anthropological photography must be read: intellectual and political. She defined the intellectual context as “manifested in theories of race,” and the political as “the expansion and maintenance of European colonial powers.”\textsuperscript{77} Edwards’s dual contexts have continued to shape studies dedicated to the application of photography to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century anthropologies and colonial projects, which has focused chiefly on the body of the ethnic


other as represented by white camera operators.\textsuperscript{78} In addition, her work serves as an important point of departure for histories of photography in colonial and post-colonial contexts, contributing to our understanding of race science and its expression in modern visual culture.\textsuperscript{79} The focus of such work has been photography’s instrumentality to anthropology. By studying the photographic field’s adoption of the anthropological language and concepts, this dissertation proposes a two-way relationship between photography to anthropology, one in which the former also relies upon the latter.

**Chapter Summaries**

From 1895 to 1904, Vroman made eight photographic trips to the Southwest and attended the Hopi Indian Snake Dance seven times. He made photographs of the ceremony as observed on the three Hopi mesas in Northeastern Arizona: in Walpi village on First Mesa (1895, 1897, and 1901), Mishongnovi on Second Mesa (1901), and Oraibi on Third Mesa (1898, 1900, and 1902). Vroman’s Snake Dance photographs established his reputation as a talented photographer, and they represent a major component of his oeuvre. Chapter 1 uses these photographs, and Vroman’s ambitions for them, to introduce the tenants of Smithsonian anthropology and social evolutionary theory. The chapter is concerned foremost with the anthropological discourses that informed the photographs’ creation and less so with the photographs’ visual content. Indeed, I cite but do not

\textsuperscript{78} See Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011). In the introduction, Pinney asserts that anthropology is particularly well positioned—owing to its “engagement with cross-cultural questions of causation, evidence, personhood and monumentality”—to interrogate the complicated and often vexed relationship the field has with photography, “the relationship between images and culture, and images and power.” Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology*, 11.

reproduce any ceremonial photographs in this or subsequent chapters. My decision to forego visual evidence complies with the Hopi Tribe’s current prohibition on the unauthorized distribution of sacred information. This shift away from the visual encouraged me to approach Vroman’s work from a new direction. It enabled me to recognize that the anthropological language used to theorize the Snake Dance—social evolutionary theory—had been adopted by the field of photography. The Snake Dance and its photography reveal the great extent to which views of photography were informed by social evolutionary theory and bound up with ideas about human and technological origins. This chapter conjoins the discourses of anthropology and photography by exploring several interrelated themes: the introduction of the camera to Hopi in 1872, the first photographs of the Snake Dance, the efforts of Vroman to make Snake Dance photographs relevant to science, and the late-nineteenth-century efforts to trace the origins of photography’s invention.

Chapter 2 considers Vroman’s first direct collaboration with the Smithsonian, using the interaction to examine the then-eroding science with which Vroman allied his photographic practice. In 1897, Smithsonian anthropologist Frederick Webb Hodge used Vroman’s photographs to defend the veracity of the Acoma Indian oral tradition that identified the Enchanted Mesa as an ancestral home. Vroman’s involvement in the Enchanted Mesa controversy consolidated his interests in making photographs for Smithsonian anthropologists. The episode also portends the uncertain scientific value of Vroman’s photographs to an anthropology that was in the process of transformation and

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professionalization. Hodge’s approach to proving the Enchanted Mesa oral tradition, particularly his use of photography, speaks to the shifting emphasis of turn-of-the-century anthropology in the United States. The chapter traces the role photography played in the entry of the Acoma Enchanted Mesa oral tradition in the written record; in conclusion, it contextualizes Hodge’s efforts to authenticate the tradition within the contemporary critique of Smithsonian anthropology. The chapter underscores a set of ambiguities that, from the start, characterized Vroman’s photographic project, most centrally his amateur status in a field that was quickly professionalizing and in which the pertinence of visual evidence was being questioned.

Chapter 3 addresses Vroman’s status as a self-taught amateur operating outside the salon system. To do so, it examines his production of negatives and printing methods, in particular the use of the platinum process. My discussion elucidates Vroman’s conflicting scientific and artistic ambitions. Attention to ambiguities in Vroman’s practice sheds new light on photographic discourses of the period, especially those regarding the amateur photographer. The amateur was held responsible for the field’s developmental stagnation and was denounced, in social evolutionary terms, as a savage. Although the uncertain artistic status of the medium has long been a subject of scholarship on early American photography, studies have mainly limited their scope of inquiry to the aesthetics of fine art, particularly as related to the tradition of Western painting. Largely lacking is a consideration of alternative discourses, such as anthropological theory. As this chapter shows, anthropological ideas not only found their way into photographic literature, but also, in the case of Vroman, affected how photographers made and understood their work. By attending to Vroman’s photographic
practice in the context of anthropology, we better understand what was at stake for the medium as an art form circa 1900. As a case study, Vroman brings into relief discourses that posited photography as a medium suspended between evolutionary (or developmental) states: the primitive state of pure technique and the civilized status of fine art. Aesthetic failure could relegate the medium to the level of the barbaric or—even worse—the savage.

From the moment of Vroman’s rediscovery in the 1960s, scholars have consistently ascribed to him a proto-modernist or modernist sensibility, often citing his cloud photographs, the subject of chapter 4, as his foremost artistic achievement. After all, the cloud photographs appear to foreshadow Alfred Stieglitz’s work on the same theme. But to conceptualize Vroman’s cloudscapes—landscapes with a predominant cloud component—as a benchmark leading to modernism is to overlook their particular context and the manner in which Vroman worked. Vroman exposed hundreds of desert cloudscape negatives, and his platinum prints of them feature prominently in the Pasadena Public Library legacy albums. An examination of contemporary photographic discourses reveals that the judicious placement of a cloud in a landscape photograph had become a standard measure by which to judge the artistic merits of a print. For those wishing to make an art photograph, composite photography—the use of two or more negatives to make a single print—was the prescribed practice. By contemporary standards, Vroman was no art photographer. He captured clouds and landscape in a single exposure and persisted in that approach. In the context of the legacy albums, it becomes evident that Vroman’s knowledge of the significance of desert clouds to the indigenous peoples of the Southwest guided his inartistic, or amateur, method of cloud photography.
In his efforts to understand highly localized, non-Western customs and beliefs, Vroman—in a way apparently unprecedented among photographers—practiced a type of picture making that was informed by American Indian culture. As the previous chapters demonstrate, much of Vroman’s photographic career was allied with a problematic anthropology that was in the throes of obsolescence. Nevertheless, a combination of anthropological knowledge and personal experience among Pueblo Indians ultimately enabled Vroman to produce certain works of lasting significance, the foremost of which are the great cloudscapes. The importance of the cloud photographs lies less in their relation to modernism and more in the remarkable cultural empathy that brought them into being.

Looking beyond Vroman, the conclusion considers the primitive status of photography circa 1900 in order to pose a series of questions about the period that followed. Might post-World War I anthropology be useful to understanding the development of modernist photography in the United States? Did the discourses of anthropology and anthropological concepts of primitive art remain relevant to the field of photography? While the relationship between modernist photography and primitive art has been explored, for example by Wendy Grossman, much remains to be said. Using the example of Surrealist Man Ray’s photographs of African art from the 1920s and 1930s, Grossman argues for the medium’s central role in the dissemination of images of non-Western art in the development of modernist Primitivism and its reaction against the industrialized West, which was understood to have exhausted its creative potential. To revitalize Western art, primitivist artists took as inspiration non-Western art forms, such as African masks, untainted by industrialization. Grossman contends that photographs
such as Man Ray’s transformed primitive forms “from artifact to art,” which worked to establish those forms as sources of primitivist inspiration. But, apart from “primitivist” form and content, what about the practice of photography itself? Might modernist photography still have been understood, in anthropological terms, as a primitive mode of artistic production?

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Chapter One

The Hopi Indian Snake Dance and the Problem of Photography’s Origins

In a letter of April 4, 1895, Captain John G. Bourke admonished American ethnologist Jesse Walter Fewkes for his recent comparative study of the Snake Dance as observed by the Hopi Indians of Arizona and rites practiced at Zia Pueblo in New Mexico. “In my own judgment,” Bourke scolded, “no exact [comparative] work...can be undertaken until some observer shall have visually and critically noted the ceremonies and photographed them.” Visual and critical observations may have permitted Fewkes to draw preliminary connections between the ceremonial practices of the two Pueblo Indian communities, but ultimately his claims apparently faltered for lack of photographic evidence. Bourke’s authority surely derived from his position as one of the earliest ethnographic recorders of the Hopi ceremony. His own account of his observations, *The Snake-Dance of the Moquis of Arizona* (1884), had inaugurated widespread scientific and popular interest in the ceremony. Yet for all his authority Bourke had missed the point of Fewkes’s study, which was primarily concerned with the origin of the Hopi Snake Dance. Fewkes must therefore have been puzzled by Bourke’s principal criticism—after all, how was he meant to trace an origin of an indigenous practice through photographs?

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83 John G. Bourke to Jesse Walter Fewkes, April 4, 1895, Papers of Jesse Walter Fewkes, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
84 Dilworth, *Imagining Indians in the Southwest*, 25. Dilworth dedicates an entire chapter to the turn-of-the-century imagery of the Hopi Snake Dance, placing particular emphasis on a white “politics of representation” that served to primitivize and silence those Hopi individuals who participated in the ceremony (75). My analysis is indebted to Dilworth’s study, as it helped to facilitate and affirm my interpretation of the failing of Snake Dance photographs to advance scientific inquiry.
In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, the Hopi Indian Snake Dance was among the best known and most photographed American Indian ceremonies in the United States. Accounts of the Snake Dance circulated nationally in newspapers, magazines, travel guides, popular books, and ethnographic studies. These reports, frequently sensationalistic, drew more and more Euro-American spectators to the three remote Hopi mesas in Northeastern Arizona. Along with the spectators came photographers, both professional and amateur.

Adam Clark Vroman was a distinguished photographer of the dance, but still only one among a legion. By the end of the century, the numbers swelled to such an extent that cameras and their operators became active—not to mention aggressive and cunning—participants in the ceremony. In 1903, for example, George Wharton James described the duplicity with which he secured his photograph in a ceremonial chamber open only to initiated practitioners:

It was with trepidation I dared to take my camera into the mystic depths of the Antelope kiva. I had guessed at focus for the altar, and when I placed the camera against the wall, pointed toward the sacred place, the Antelope priests bid me remove it immediately. I begged to have it remain so long as I stayed, but was compelled to promise I would not place my head under the black cloth and look at the altar. This I readily promised, but at the first opportunity when no one was between the lens and the altar, I quietly removed the cap from the lens, marched away and sat down with one of the priests, while the dim light performed its wonderful work on the sensitive plate. A fine photograph was the result.

Likewise, in 1904 Sumner Matteson admitted in reference to tourists who stole objects that it was “bad enough to steal photographs of their altars and secret ceremonies.”

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85 As indicated in the introduction to this dissertation, the culturally sensitive nature of Snake Dance photographs prohibits their reproduction, even as a potential aid to the current argument. Where possible in the footnotes, however, I have provided links to images reproduced on various websites.
Years later in his autobiography, Hopi Don Talayesva recounted the violent confrontations at Oraibi between Snake Dance participants and camera-toting Methodist missionary Heinrich Voth. Talayesva wrote: “During the ceremonies this wicked man would force his way into the kiva and write down everything he saw. He wore shoes with solid heels, and when the Hopi tried to put him out of the kiva he would kick them.” What is more, the Hopi understood that with his camera Voth stole more than objects. He took from the Hopi “sacred images,” which could refer equally to the objects and to photographs.88

Vroman’s extant prints and negatives suggest he never entered a kiva, photographing only public aspects of the ceremonies. The one altar he photographed in 1900, associated with the Hopi Indian Flute Ceremony, was erected in an initiate’s house, not a kiva, and Vroman claimed to have met “no objection” to his presence.89 Nevertheless, his strategies were consistent with those of contemporaries. In his approach to photographing the Snake Dance and other ceremonies, he employed increasingly aggressive tactics, which Native critic Leslie Marmon Silko has described, in reference to Vroman, as “vampiric.”90 The frenzy for photographing the Snake Dance resulted in a surfeit of images—published, projected, collected, exchanged, sold, purchased, archived—deemed important to the study of the ceremony.

89 Adam Clark Vroman, “The Moki Snake Dance,” Photo Era 6, no. 4 (Apr. 1901): 352. Vroman’s photographs of the Flute Ceremony altar are housed at the Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, CA. Weinstein asserts that Vroman once “strongly reprimanded” James for “invading a scared Hopi kiva, unannounced and uninvited.” Weinstein does not cite his source, and I have been unable to verify the exchange. See Webb and Weinstein, Dwellers at the Source, 14.
As Vroman discovered, however, photography was a stubbornly inadequate tool for men of science looking to answer a fundamental anthropological question—what were man’s origins? His frustrated ambitions to make photographs relevant to the scientific study of the Snake Dance demonstrate the limits of photography as an evidentiary medium.

Vroman’s struggles further reveal an important and hitherto unrecognized aspect of period discussions of photography. At the turn of the twentieth century, photographs were widely understood to be devoid of original or imaginative thought. Champions of photography who sought to identify the medium’s civilized genius turned not to the mechanically produced and hence unimaginative end product, the photograph itself. Instead, they focused on the medium’s technological development and the cognitive evolution it represented. In doing so, they drew heavily upon the discourses of anthropology.

Social evolutionary theory was the principle on which nineteenth-century American anthropology was founded. In social evolutionary terms, contemporaries viewed the Hopi and the photographic medium as occupying a similar state of development. The American iteration of this theory was premised on the psychic unity of man and attributed human development to the imaginative capacity of the mind. Inventions, such as religious ceremonies and particularly applied technologies, served as an important gauge of imagination. The origins and development of an invention were understood as empirical evidence of the mind’s advancement from savagery to civilization. Emphasizing Anglo-American achievement, anthropologists identified the

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91 My discussion of Smithsonian anthropology is drawn largely from Hinsley, *The Smithsonian and the American Indian*. 
peak of human progress in Western civilization. Conversely, the material and social practices of the living indigenous peoples of North America served as proof of the baser mental phases through which the so-called civilized mind had long since evolved.

Photography itself occupied an uncertain evolutionary status. As a representational medium, its place on the scale between the (lowly) mechanical copy of nature and (high) art was unclear and highly contested. The Snake Dance and its photography offer an important insight into the debate. They reveal the great extent to which views of photography were at once deeply conversant with social evolutionary theory and bound up in ideas about technological origins and human intellectual development. This chapter brings together the discourses of anthropology and photography by exploring several interrelated themes: the introduction of the camera to Hopi in 1872, the first photographs of the Snake Dance, the efforts of Vroman to make Snake Dance photographs relevant to science, and late-nineteenth century efforts to trace the evolutionary origins of photography’s invention.

**Photography and the Invention of the Hopi**

As in the disputes about photography’s origins that erupted in the 1830s and 1840s, establishing the primacy of invention was central to the beginning of photography in Hopi, first documented in 1872. Prior to the public announcement of the daguerreotype process in August 1839, reports of J. L. M. Daguerre’s success in permanently fixing a camera obscura image to a metal plate had circulated throughout Europe for several months. By August, a bevy of rivals from France, England, Germany, Switzerland, Norway, Spain, and the United States clamored to unseat Daguerre as photography’s
inventors. Although most of Daguerre’s rivals had failed to produce a permanent photographic image, each sought to establish his respective claim to invention. Lacking successfully fixed images, these claimants offered written proof of photographic experimentation, rather than evidential photographs, to establish as their own the creation of the new medium. Above practical achievement, contributions to the written record by both would-be inventors and their defenders were understood as determinative of intellectual precedence. Decades later, the origins of photography in Hopi similarly characterized the competing claims of explorer Major John Wesley Powell and photographer Elias Olcott Beaman. For these rivals, written declarations were also of greater concern than evidential photographs. In national print magazines, photographically derived wood engravings illustrated, but were secondary to, the texts penned by Powell and Beaman. Although a dispute over photography ignited their feud, these men each sought to establish an authoritative written account of an otherwise history-less people. The two thus battled over the invention of the Hopi as objects of historical inquiry.

Powell initially explored the Hopi villages in 1870 and planned to return with Beaman, the first photographer for his United States Geographical and Geological Survey of the Rocky Mountain Region (1871–1879), during the 1871–72 survey season. Powell’s was the final of the four federal surveys of the Trans-Mississippi West to be established by Congress in the aftermath of the Civil War. For a standard history of these and earlier surveys, including Powell’s 1870 trip to Hopi, see William H. Goetzmann, Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the  

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95 Powell’s was the final of the four federal surveys of the Trans-Mississippi West to be established by Congress in the aftermath of the Civil War. For a standard history of these and earlier surveys, including Powell’s 1870 trip to Hopi, see William H. Goetzmann, Exploration and Empire: The Explorer and the
was forced to delay the trip until the following season, but the Hopi nevertheless occupied a prominent position on that year’s agenda. As they navigated their boats through perilous rapids of the Colorado River, the major and his staff stopped frequently along the canyon to note, collect, and photograph evidence of ancient indigenous occupancy. Members of the party referred to the former inhabitants interchangeably as Moquis, Shinumos, and Aztecs. Although not used by the Hopi themselves, each of these terms also served the explorers to describe and define contemporary Hopi Indians. Indeed, thoroughly captivated by the spectacular ruins of the ancient cliff dwellers, the survey party was eager to arrive at the Hopi mesas to explore the vestiges of a once-great society. No doubt keen to be the first photographer of the Hopi, Beaman evidently shared in this enthusiasm. But Powell’s staff was to be disappointed. In December 1871, the major was compelled to leave the field for Washington, DC, to secure additional survey funding from Congress. He ordered Beaman to prepare prints for promotional use, but Beaman evidently had more ambitious plans for his photographs and expressed intense displeasure in ceding ownership of his creative work to Powell. After a “rumpus,” Powell dismissed Beaman and was forced to buy the negatives outright from the photographer.

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96 See particularly W. C. Powell’s journal but also the remainder of the Powell survey members’ journals edited by and printed in Utah Historical Quarterly 15 (1947) and Utah Historical Quarterly 16–17 (1948–1949).


made in a local studio, and continued on to the US capital. Beaman, freed from Powell, turned his attention to Hopi.

Beaman and his camera arrived in Hopi in August 1872, several months ahead of Powell and John K. Hillers, the survey’s new field photographer. Clearly pleased to have bested the major, Beaman sent a letter to the editor of *Anthony’s Photographic Bulletin* in which he declared himself the first photographer of “a country and people that had never yet been photographed” (Fig. 17). A consummate showman, he wrote of a superstitious people who looked upon his photographs of the built environment with “wonder and amazement” but who nevertheless destroyed all photographs of themselves. Trading on popular, homogenizing concepts of the relationship between North American Indians and the camera, Beaman observed that the Hopi “evidently look[ed] upon a picture as a sure passport to the happy hunting-grounds of another world.”99 The photographer was doubtless alluding to the notion widely attributed to indigenous people that the photograph harnessed the soul and brought death to the pictured individual, a notion that continues to inform the popular historical imagination.100 Several years later Beaman exchanged theatricality for circumspection, noting instead that Hopi reactions to the camera and to photographs varied from village to village.101

Even if Beaman was the “first” to photograph in Hopi, his assertion to have generally introduced photography to the Hopi is highly suspect. Although the photographer claimed to be among the first few white men to enter the villages, by 1872

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the Hopi mesas had been the site of military activity and prolonged Euro-American trading and missionary work. Surely a few Hopi individuals had encountered a photograph, and their responses would have been uninformed by established conventions. Written texts, after all, instructed urban Americans how to understand and react to the medium in the first decades after its introduction to the United States.  

What, then, of non-literate peoples who had received no such instruction? Their reactions to photography were not only unscripted; they were also subject to the agendas of Euro-Americans—like Beaman—whose mission included the creation of a historical record.

As Beaman worked to fix his own place in history as the “first” photographer of the Hopi, he denied the Hopi a history that preceded the moment when he purportedly introduced them to the camera. He struggled to describe “the romantic, strange appearance of [the] antiquated cities of the descendants of Montezuma” and deferred to the more eloquent and expressive qualities of his own photographs. Perhaps aware that his prints would not be reproduced in Anthony’s, Beaman managed to muster his powers of description:

The country…is in many places strewn with broken crockery or beautiful workmanship and painting; the cañon walls are in many places covered with hieroglyphics [e.g., pictographs], whose meaning is totally unknown to the Indians now inhabiting these regions. These signs of a once powerful and semi-civilized people are plainly traceable to the Aztec cities, the inhabitants of which do not now number over twelve hundred souls.

In identifying the Hopi as Aztecan, Beaman, echoing an argument advanced by Lieutenant James H. Simpson in 1852, affirmed that evidence of former semi-civility

103 Beaman, “Among the Aztecs,” 746.
104 Ibid., 746.
simply could not be indigenous. To his mind, moreover, contemporary Hopi were wholly ignorant of their remarkable past, unable to read a picture history preserved on stone. Even had he been able to converse with the Hopi, their oral deciphering would have hardly altered Beaman’s assessment. Western standards required that history be located and locatable in the written record; thus American Indians were understood to lack a history altogether. Beaman provided an account of the Hopi that both affirmed and redressed this perceived lack, and at the same time insured that his own picture history—his so-called first photographs of Hopi—entered into history.

As a former member of Powell’s survey, Beaman was well aware of the major’s 1870 exploration of the Hopi villages and of Powell’s own claims to the Hopi. While Powell had neglected to publish a report of that trip, Beaman apparently dashed off his letter to Anthony’s immediately upon his departure from the villages in 1872. The urgency with which he made his submission to the journal suggests that, emboldened by a self-proclaimed authority as the first photographer of the “Seven Aztec cities” of Arizona, Beaman sought to promote a history of the Hopi that countered Powell’s as-yet undocumented theory. After 1872, Beaman continued to challenge his predecessor in a series of illustrated articles that reflected on his photographic experiences in Hopi and solidified his authority. Possibly in response, Powell in 1875 finally published an account of the 1870 explorations in *Scribner’s Monthly*, illustrated with wood engravings.

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106 On the notion that oral traditions and histories amounted to fiction in the Western imagination, see Steven Conn, *History’s Shadow: Native Americans and Historical Consciousness in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 22.
derived from Hillers’s October 1872 Hopi photographs.\textsuperscript{108} Beaman’s and Powell’s magazine illustrations (and Beaman’s and Hillers’s photographs) were remarkably similar. What distinguished them was the written apparatus that framed them.

While Beaman continued to identify the Hopi as Aztecan, Powell instead conceived of them as descendants of the “Shinumos.” “Who are these people?,” he asked of the Hopi. “Linguistic evidence shows them to be nearly related to some of the nomadic tribes of the Rocky Mountains and the Sierras.” He continued: “These town-building people seem to be a branch of this great family; now, but a remnant of this branch is left; but there was a time when they were a vast people…. On every stream, and at almost every spring of importance, vestiges of this race may be found.”\textsuperscript{109} In tracing Hopi lineage through language, Powell shared Beaman’s view that the Hopi were without a history. Powell’s conclusions, moreover, anticipated the American iteration of social evolutionary theory that he would help codify at the end of the decade. Without their own claim to a proper, written history, the Hopi represented ready material for the formation of an evolutionary schema that attempted to chart the origins and development of Western culture.

**Picturing the Hopi Snake Dance**

In his 1898 article “Origin of the Cliff Dwellings,” Southwest archaeologist Cosmos Mindeleff asserted that “[h]ouse building is an art, and in the study of an art the comparative method is the only one to be followed.”\textsuperscript{110} With his concentration on

\begin{footnotes}
\item[109] Ibid., 212.
\end{footnotes}
physical evidence, Mindeleff dismissed as unfounded and unscientific the Aztecan hypothesis that so fascinated Beaman, but he refrained from criticizing approaches advanced outside of the archaeological field, such as Powell’s with its emphasis on language. Mindeleff maintained the “local origin” of the cliff dwellings and for his conclusion relied on a comparison of architectural forms found in the ruins and in contemporary Pueblo Indian villages. Although the dwellings he compared were either “undoubtedly very old” or “modern,” the archaeologist ascertained no fundamental formal differences between them. Accounting for the continuity of ancient and modern architecture, Mindeleff wrote, “[t]he American Indian, like all other savages, is extremely sensitive to his environment…. He is in such close touch with nature that he responds quickly to her varying moods…not so much in his physique as in his arts and ideas.” According to this view, an initial reaction to the environment, not sustained thought, accounted for the origin of Pueblo Indian architectural forms. In addition, continuity of form suggested that nature continued to shape the products—that is, the art and ideas—of the “savage” mind. Mindeleff thus concluded that the Pueblo system, neither past nor present, belonged to “no particular period either in culture or in time.” Pueblo architecture was nevertheless demonstrative of the original savage state from which the cultured or civilized mind had long since evolved.

In the cliff-dwellings article, the archaeologist briefly paused from architectural ruminations to describe “[p]erhaps the most striking” of the rites that took place in a kiva: the Hopi Indian Snake Dance. Ostensibly concerned with the form of the underground ceremonial chambers, or kivas, Mindeleff instead described the component of the

111 Ibid., 112.
112 Ibid., 117.
ceremony that he had observed on the village plazas as early as 1885. Although confident in his assertion of the local origin of architectural forms, he avoided assigning any specific meaning to the Snake Dance. Instead he noted that ceremonies like it were “often dramatic representations of mythological events, or a form of prayer for favors sought, or perhaps of thanksgiving for favors received.”

What then was the Snake Dance? A reenactment? A supplication? A benediction? And just how “savage” was it? By 1898, the dance had become the subject of sustained scientific and popular interest, but Euro-Americans remained unable to identify the meaning of the ceremony and were therefore unsure of the evolutionary development that it may (or may not) have represented. These issues were irresolvable precisely because the origin of the Snake Dance proved elusive to Western investigators.

The year that Mindeleff first observed the Snake Dance was the same year he became one of the ceremony’s first photographers. From the start, photography’s suitability as even a visual-descriptive tool of the ceremony was uncertain. Mindeleff was compelled to annotate—to guide his viewer through—his first photographs. In the early 1880s, the Smithsonian Institution’s fledging Bureau of American Ethnology engaged his brother Victor to undertake a survey of the architecture on the three Hopi mesas. In 1885, the Mindeleff brothers together surveyed the ruins surrounding the modern villages. For this trip they were outfitted with a camera, and in August they photographed the Snake Dance in Mishongnovi village on Second, or Middle, Mesa. Mindeleff’s nine extant

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113 Ibid., 116–117
photographs make clear that in the context of the ceremony he struggled against nature to master his equipment. Customarily observed as the sun set, the dance was increasingly enveloped in shadow, which caused Mindeleff great difficulty in timing his exposures. Awash in bright light, the walls of the houses surrounding the dance plaza and the villagers perched thereon were overexposed. Here the action of light worked to dematerialize the uppermost reaches of the structures, collapsing all distinction between the built environment and the blown out sky. The central figures on the darkened and underexposed dance plaza appear not so much blurry as muddy, an effect exacerbated by the movement of the dancers and snakes. Frustrated in his photographic efforts, Mindeleff was forced to rely on descriptive texts to clarify the content of the images. On the verso of one of the printed photographs he noted, “[t]he markings on the body, the necklaces and shells, the bracelets on the arms, the kilt…, the feathers in the hair are plainly seen.” On another he referred to the visibility of the “motion of the legs in the dance” and the presence of an indiscernible snake. These written descriptions guided the viewer, rendering “plainly seen” what were otherwise indiscernible details.

That Mindeleff remained uncertain of the photographs’ evidential value is suggested by the fact that they were never published in a scientific venue and were eventually used as a highly edited form of popular entertainment. Mindeleff’s article on “An Indian Snake-Dance” that appeared in Science in 1886, for example, included several wood engravings: two ground plans of the Walpi village on First Mesa, Snake

115 Cosmos Mindeleff, verso of photograph number two, Photo Lot 022223100 SPC, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
116 Cosmos Mindeleff, verso of photograph number four, Photo Lot 022223100 SPC, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
117 Published to illustrate an article in Harper’s Weekly, a wood engraving made “from photographs by Cosmos Mindeleff” was a complete fabrication that consists of various groupings unrelated to any of Mindeleff’s photographs. See William M. Edwardy, “The Snake Dance of the Moqui Indians,” Harper's Weekly (Nov. 2, 1889): 871.
Dance “paraphernalia,” and unpeopled illustrations derived from photographs of the plaza and an entrance to a kiva (Fig. 18). Assuming that photographic evidence would have bolstered his authority as an eyewitness to the ceremony, presumably the “first,” why exclude it?

One answer to this question returns us to the issue of photography and origins. Citing evidence found throughout the world, Mindeleff noted that snake worship was “universally distributed” and “exercised so large an influence on religion” that the Hopi Snake Dance must be of interest.\textsuperscript{118} After outlining the details of the Mishongnovi ceremony, he concluded, in opposition to consensus, that the Snake Dance was not a form of serpent worship.\textsuperscript{119} Rather, Mindeleff supposed the snakes were the “most appropriate messengers” in an invocation for rain. Despite his intervention, he ultimately failed to identify the “underlying ideas” of the dance, the key to which lay in “an esoteric legend, one very jealously guarded.”\textsuperscript{120} Because “traces” of serpent worship could be found in the history of most all nations and tribes, the legend was essential not only to the discovery of the origin of the Hopi Snake Dance but also to an originary moment in the evolution of the human mind. Photography, it seemed, proved no help to that investigation. It was in this context that Vroman attempted to insert his photographs into scientific discourses.

\textsuperscript{119} Here Mindeleff is particularly criticizing the conclusions offered by John G. Bourke in his \textit{The Snake-Dance of the Moquis of Arizona} (1884).
\textsuperscript{120} Mindeleff, “An Indian Snake-Dance,” 513.
Vroman’s Photographs of the Snake Dance

In the summer of 1895, Vroman received what proved to be a transformative invitation. Fellow Pasadenaan Horatio N. Rust asked him to join an excursion to northeastern Arizona to witness the Hopi Indian Snake Dance.121 Already an avid photography hobbyist, Vroman arrived at Walpi village on East Mesa with at least three cameras in his kit—two view cameras and a handheld. Unaware of the technical challenges that confronted would-be photographers of the Snake Dance, in 1895 Vroman believed himself prepared to confront any number of photographic obstacles. But as members of the Antelope clan exited their ceremonial chamber and advanced to the village’s central plaza to commence the public component of the Snake Dance, he quickly realized his mistake. Vroman appears to have experienced mounting anxiety as the sun set and light faded from the plaza:

> It was fully six oclock before the first signs of Dance and the sun had dropped entirely behind the buildings leaving the Plaza wholly in shadow and so late in the evening I almost [despaired] of getting results satisfactory. To give a little time would show motion as they were moving rapidly & “snap shots” would show lack of time in exposure so tried both with poor results…. 122

Although these first efforts to photograph the Snake Dance elicited praise from Vroman’s contemporaries, he declared the photographs “quite unsatisfactory.”123 The likely reason for his negative judgment was that in the photographs the dancers, in near-constant motion, appear as mere blurs. The details of notable interest to him—the “costumes” and

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121 The invitation to Hopi suggests that Vroman, though only a recent transplant to Pasadena, had already established significant ties to Pasadena’s cultural and social elite.
123 Adam Clark Vroman, verso of photographs ten and eleven from “Trip to Arizona, 1895,” Horatio N. Rust Photograph Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
the bodies of the dancers—were lost. While he concluded that “[w]ords cannot picture it all,” his views themselves were also unable to provide a satisfactory visual image of the scene. Recognizing the photographs’ limitations, Vroman published them only once and discontinued printing from the negatives after 1897.

Vroman may have expressed pleasure over the reception of his photographs, but he remained dissatisfied with their quality. At Walpi, the Hopi observed the Snake Dance every odd year; in 1897, Vroman returned to the village to re-photograph the dance, “select[ing] the same position as in 95 and trust[ing] for better success.” Prior to the return to Walpi, Vroman had continued his photographic education. Of particular note is his successful completion of a commission to photograph the Spanish missions along California’s El Camino Real. He was now alert and deftly responsive to the environmental impediments that had prevented good results in 1895. The clarity of his 1897 photographs demonstrate an increased proficiency in technique and better control over the photographic equipment. With a professional’s aplomb, he even managed to operate his camera and those of his two companions, who were new to the Snake Dance and distracted by its wonderment to the point of neglecting their cameras. He approached the ceremony with an ease he had not known in 1895. Vroman also reported an increased enthusiasm for the Snake Dance, as he better understood “what was coming.” By 1897,

124 Adam Clark Vroman, verso of photograph fourteen from “Trip to Arizona, 1895,” Horatio N. Rust Photograph Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.

125 See Horatio N. Rust, “The Moqui Snake Dance,” *The Land of Sunshine* 4, no. 2 (January 1896): 70–76. Although the ceremony is Rust’s primary subject matter, of the six accompanying halftones derived from Vroman’s images only one depicts the dance itself. Vroman traveled with Rust to the Snake Dance and perhaps out of gratitude not only allowed Rust to reproduce his images in the article but also presented Rust with a set of nineteen prints, which chronicle the entire trip, made from his 1895 negatives. Those photographs, now housed at the Huntington Library, include two Snake Dance views and are among the only extant prints of Vroman’s first attempts to photograph the ceremony. The Huntington has digitized Vroman’s photographs for Rust and has made them available online. See photographs 11 and 12 at https://tinyurl.com/ybjpzbbx.

126 Vroman, “Three Week Trip of 1897 Through Arizona and New Mexico,” n.p., Cheryl Slyter Collection of A. C. Vroman, MI.
Vroman was more than just a repeat witness equipped with a camera. After the 1895 dance, he had declared that his “first thought was…to see it again and know more about it, why it was, and how it is planned. I felt I could spend a year right there, be one of them, and learn their ways and beliefs. It is a sacred rite with them and carried out to the letter as they believe it.”

Clearly the Snake Dance had taken hold of him, and from 1895 to 1897 Vroman initiated a program of study. Aided by his profession as a bookstore owner, he immersed himself in both the popular and scientific literature of the ceremony. He would surely have been familiar with publications such as John G. Bourke’s *Snake-Dance of the Moquis* (1884), the first study dedicated to the ceremony; Charles Fletcher Lummis’s article in *St. Nicholas*, a children’s magazine (April 1892); Thomas Donaldson’s *Moqui Pueblo Indians of Arizona and Pueblo Indians of New Mexico* (1893); and Jesse Walter Fewkes’s *The Snake Ceremonials at Walpi* (1894). In his 1897 journal, rather than attempt a description of the dance, as he had for the 1895 dance, he referred to the poet Hamlin Garland’s 1896 *Harper’s Weekly* account, which he pasted down in the rear of the journal. In 1895, Smithsonian ethnologist Fewkes, who was considered the foremost expert on the ceremony, had attended the Walpi observance and had apprised Garland of the secret rites observed by Snake Dance participants in the underground kivas.

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127 Adam Clark Vroman, verso of photograph fourteen from “Trip to Arizona, 1895,” Horatio N. Rust Photograph Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
129 In his “Among the Moqui Indians,” Garland consistently reminded of this relationship throughout the essay; “Dr. Fewkes informing the author” is like a refrain in the text. Fewkes also provided Garland with illustrations made for his scientific studies of the ceremony, and in 1897 endorsed Garland for having penned “the best popular account of the Walpi Snake dance yet published.” See Hamlin Garland, “Among the Moqui Indians,” *Harper’s Weekly* (Aug. 15, 1896): 801–807. For Fewkes on Garland see
the man of science. Vroman’s 1897 diary indicates that he was star-struck by the presence, and authority, of the ethnologist at that year’s observance of the dance. Moreover, he appears to have engaged Fewkes in conversation:

Dr Fewkes was on hand watching every motion as he has for five consecutive Dances & yet he says that he is only just commencing to understand what much of it means.

Dr Fewkes was this year allowed to enter the kivas & witness nearly the entire ceremony connected with the Dance & I believe he is the only white man who has been allowed the entire freedom of the kivas. Others claim to have been so favored but I doubt very much if they have.130

It is highly likely that Vroman had read Fewkes’s seminal *Snake Ceremonials* and had discovered there Fewkes’s only comment on photography of the Snake Dance thus far. In the annotated bibliography, albeit parenthetically, Fewkes noted “[Ben] Whittick’s [sic] valuable photographs reproduced” in an 1891 article by R. W. Shufeldt in *The Great Divide*.131 Despite his designation of Wittick’s photographs as “valuable,” in Fewkes’s *Snake Ceremonials* the only image of the dance proper was an illustration drawn by Ferdinand Lundgren.

By 1897, Vroman was certainly familiar with Wittick, and he set out to emulate him. Wittick attended and photographed both the 1895 and 1897 ceremonials, where Vroman would have witnessed him in action. When Wittick’s photographs appeared alongside Shufeldt’s “The Snake Dance of the Moquis,” he had lived in New Mexico for

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130 Vroman, “Three Week Trip of 1897 Through Arizona and New Mexico,” n.p., Cheryl Slyter Collection of A. C. Vroman, MI.

131 He rarely condemned other studies but did not shy away from vitriol, as when he shamed census taker Thomas Donaldson for publishing an “untrustworthy” account of the Hopi Snake Dance and “inaccuracies about the Pueblos.” See Fewkes, “The Snake Ceremonials at Walpi,” *A Journal of American Ethnology and Archaeology* 4 (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1894), 124. The four photographs that did appear in this seminal book were made by Fewkes himself; these depict two named clan priests, ceremonial participants descending First Mesa, and members of the Snake clan in the aftermath of the ceremony. Although Fewkes continued to carry a camera with him in the field, he rarely used photographs as supporting evidence in his early scholarship.
about twelve years. By that time, Wittick had owned and operated photography studios in Santa Fe, Albuquerque, and Gallup and had made regular photographic excursions to northeastern Arizona. As Fewkes’s commendation suggests, Wittick was a generally well regarded photographer of the Snake Dance. He was also among the earliest and gained distinction for being the first to photograph the ceremony on each of the three Hopi Mesas. Of the two 1889 Snake Dance photographs by Wittick published in *The Great Divide*, “the first of these,” Shufeldt noted, “shows the dance is about to begin, and the second is taken at a time when the excitement is at the highest pitch, and the dancers are rapidly passing round the sacred rock….” To make the second photograph, Wittick stood at the same bird’s-eye aspect from which Vroman would. In 1895, Vroman’s position might have been a matter of serendipity. By 1897, however, he had begun to familiarize himself with the literature of ethnology and had undoubtedly read Fewkes’s praise of Wittick’s bird’s-eye views.

Delighted by his 1897 success, Vroman began distributing his Snake Dance prints to interested parties. Among the recipients was Indian trader and acquaintance Thomas Varker Keam, whose post was situated close to the first Hopi mesa. On October 13, 1897, Keam thanked Vroman for “the lot of splendid views” and apprised him of Wittick’s photographic fortunes for that ceremonial season: “Wittick has not developed his [negatives] yet, he sent me one or two portraits which turned out very good[,] some other pictures he tells me were failures.” Perhaps Vroman recognized in Wittick’s failure an opportunity to advance his own reputation as a photographer of the Snake Dance, and for

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132 For an overview of Wittick’s work see Broder, *Shadows on Glass*.
134 Thomas Varker Keam to Adam Clark Vroman, October 13, 1897, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
that reason continued to supply Keam with prints. A week later, Keam was compelled to offer his thanks for a second lot of views, again “splendid,” which Keam thought indicative of Vroman’s “wonderful success.”

Possibly emboldened by this, Vroman approached Fewkes. At some point that fall, Vroman sent Snake Dance prints to the ethnologist. Letters from Keam to Vroman suggest that the prints he sent to the ethnologist were, to his great disappointment, met with silence. In December, Keam mentioned to Vroman that he was expecting Fewkes to arrive at the trading post in time to observe the Hopi winter solstice ceremonies. In response, Vroman evidently grumbled over Fewkes’s impertinence, and on December 29 Keam replied:

> It’s not very gratifying to one after sending a lot of pictures to not even receive an acknowledgment, which appears to be the case with Dr. Fewkes, who by the way came here on the night of the 20th…and left on the 26th. He spent Xmas with us and we talked…of your pictures, and your photograph which is on the mantle. It’s strange if this did not remind him of your kindness. Had your letter reached me before his departure, I would have asked him. He certainly must have received them, but these scientific men (or some of them) appear to be overburdened with other material at times, the[y] forget what is due from one gentleman to another.

Although Fewkes eventually received Vroman’s photographs, he did not praise Vroman as he had Wittick. One reason for Fewkes’s disinterest could have been that the immediate focus of his scholarship had shifted, and views made in Walpi were, for the time being, less relevant to his inquiries. Indeed, his attention had turned away from Walpi and toward the Snake Dances observed on Second and Third Mesas.

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135 Thomas Varker Keam to Adam Clark Vroman, October 20, 1897, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
136 Thomas Varker Keam to Adam Clark Vroman, December 29, 1897, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
At the same time Vroman was endeavoring to make satisfactory bird’s-eye views of the dance at Walpi, Fewkes was declaring Walpi the “most complicated”—that is, most evolutionarily advanced—iteration of the ceremony. In his 1897 “Tusayan Snake Ceremonies,” he identified the observances at Shungopavi and Sipaulovi villages on Second Mesa and Oraibi on Third as more “primitive,” and thus more accurately representative of the original ceremony. A comparative ethnology of all five Snake Dance ceremonies practiced on the three Hopi mesas would help to ascertain the “nature and meaning” of the dance, which Fewkes had failed to uncover conclusively at Walpi. Although Fewkes illustrated his report with dance photographs he made at Oraibi, he never referred to them in the body of his text and did not publish comparative photographs from Walpi or any other village. Instead, he featured drawings he had made of sand paintings in the Snake and Antelope kivas at Shungopavi, Sipaulovi, and Oraibi. Those sacred spaces and representations allowed him to draw new conclusions about the dual nature of the dance and to link it to the Flute Ceremony, which was observed every other August in alternation with the Snake Dance.

In 1901, Fewkes developed these ideas in a more exhaustive study on the relationship between the Snake Dance and Flute Ceremony (“Tusayan Flute and Snake Ceremonies”). His assumptions and conclusions about the relationship remained consistent with those made in 1897. Unprecedented for Fewkes, however, was his use of photographs to illustrate his text, all of which were made in Walpi. Noting that the past five “performances” of the Walpi Snake Dance (in 1891, 1893, 1895, 1897, and 1899) had been “photographed again and again,” Fewkes observed a “steady improvement” in

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the quality of the prints “at each successive presentation.” Although the ethnologist did not specify what constituted the improvement, the choice of photographs suggests his meaning. They had been made by George Wharton James, an amateur photographer and self-proclaimed expert on the Southwest. Much to the consternation of the Hopi ceremonial participants, James had not photographed from the periphery of the plaza but in the midst of the dancers. In the captions he penned for his personal album of Snake Dance photographs, James boasts of the “anger” he saw in the faces of the practitioners and caught on his negatives in 1897. Likewise, he scoffed at the horror expressed when, standing near the action with his camera, he, “a white man in the sacred circle,” interfered with the snakes. James photographed in such close proximity to the dancers that each was identifiable. Fewkes, in his report, was able to name each participant, describe each man’s ceremonial responsibilities, and list the details of his dress. The influx of white spectators to Walpi, Fewkes maintained, had so unnerved the “Snake men” that they “did not handle the reptiles in the fearless manner of earlier performances.” The younger participants “glanced so often at the spectators that their thoughts seemed to be on other subjects than the solemn duty before them.” Fewkes was evidently unconcerned with photography’s part in what he deemed a “degeneration of the religious character of the Walpi Snake dance.” His intimation that James’s aggressive methods produced a proper photography of the dance certainly emboldened Vroman to follow that example.

By 1901, when Fewkes published his report, Vroman had photographed the ceremony four times: in 1895 and 1897 in Walpi village on First Mesa and in 1898 and

140 Fewkes, “Tusayan Flute and Snake Ceremonies,” 978.
1900 in Oraibi village on Third Mesa. Over time, he assumed an increasingly assertive approach to photographing the dance; he moved himself and his camera from the periphery of the central dance plaza, ever closer to, and finally into the midst of the ceremonial participants.\(^{141}\) In general, his approach had become more aggressive. In 1899, for example, the Governor of Santo Domingo explicitly forbade Vroman from photographing the village. According to Smithsonian ethnologist Frederick Webb Hodge, Vroman disregarded the prohibition and “carried his Kodak into the town” and despite “being twice overhauled by the Indians for attempting to wade the rules” photographed the Corn Dance.\(^{142}\) Vroman later referred to these photographs as “stolen.”\(^{143}\)

The Snake Dance photographs he selected for reproduction in “The Moki Snake Dance,” a 1901 article in *Photo Era*, speak to his transition from cautious witness to intrusive photographer. The four images include a bird’s-eye view made in Walpi in 1897 and three from Oraibi in 1900. The Walpi photograph provides a general visual description of the scene of the dance, but the particulars are difficult to ascertain, so for legibility the photograph depends on Vroman’s descriptive caption: “The ‘Hugger’ with arm over ‘Carrier’s’ shoulder, the ‘Gatherer’ following.”\(^{144}\) The 1900 Oraibi photographs, picturing moments from the beginning, middle, and end of the public component of the Snake Dance, situate Vroman’s readers at the center of the ceremonial activity. He emphasized his close proximity to the dancers by including in the images the

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141 Princeton University Library has digitized and put online the contents of their 1901 Vroman albums. For a visual example of Vroman’s aggressive approach see http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/8p58pd67w. Compare these photographs with the halftone reproductions of Vroman’s 1897 Snake Dance views published, for example, in Walter Hough’s *The Moki Snake Dance*: https://tinyurl.com/y78fy9pu.

142 Frederick Webb Hodge Diary, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.

143 Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, September 19, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.

Euro-American and Native spectators in attendance—standing or sitting at a notable distance from the ritual action. The views afforded readers not only the opportunity to assume, or imagine themselves in, the role of the photographer but also of the ceremonial participant.

In *Photo Era*, Vroman’s account of the aspect of the ceremony that most intrigued Euro-Americans was consistent with his more sensationalistic-minded contemporaries. But he also sought to contextualize the dance in the Hopi ceremonial calendar and reproduced views he had made of the 1900 Flute Ceremony (in Walpi and Mishongnovi), a ceremony Fewkes had—in his efforts to trace the origins of the ceremony—linked to the Snake Dance starting in 1897. Vroman’s insistence on framing these photographs in scientific terms must be understood as an effort to demonstrate their relevance to anthropology. Fewkes had photographed the Flute Ceremony in Mishongnovi in 1896, but the poor quality of his negatives had evidently prohibited their reproduction as halftones in “Tusayan Flute and Snake Ceremonies.” Instead, line drawings were made after the negatives. Unlike the more popular Snake Dance, there had been no “steady improvement,” to quote Fewkes, in the photography of the Flute Ceremony. In his *Photo Era* article, Vroman arguably recommended himself to the ethnologist but to no avail.

In accounts published by photographer-contemporaries, most notably by James, halftone illustrations of the Snake Dance accompanied popularizing narratives that described the ceremony as “as thrilling as it is repulsive, fascinating as it is hideous, and attractive and exciting as it is alarming.” Just as often, such accounts boasted of using deception to make photographs in ceremonial chambers closed to all but Hopi initiates. In

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fact, Vroman’s photographs had enjoyed a widespread popular reception for several years and had accompanied narratives as sensationalistic as James’s. Walter Hough, a reputable Smithsonian ethnologist, had relied on Vroman’s Snake Dance photographs to illustrate a popular guidebook he had written on behalf of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway in 1898. Likewise, travel writers John L. Stoddard and E. Burton Holmes “used freely” Vroman’s work to illustrate their lantern slide lectures on the Southwest.\textsuperscript{146} The two had also reproduced Vroman’s Snake Dance photographs in travelogues of 1898 and 1900. Vroman’s photographs continued to attract popular interest. The Detroit Publishing Company began circulating chromolithographic postcards and prints of Vroman’s Snake Dance photographs around 1900, and the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway again relied on his views in another guidebook, \textit{Indians of the Southwest}, published in 1903.

Nevertheless, popular appeal appears not to have been Vroman’s main aspiration. Vroman’s stymied ambitions to place his photographs in scientific publications points to the difficulty contemporaries had in using photographs to ascertain the origins and meaning of the Snake Dance. Visual and critical observations in the form of notes may have permitted ethnologists such as Fewkes to draw connections between the ceremonial practices on each of the three mesas, but photographs could not prove the ceremony’s origins.

\textbf{Inventing Photography’s Origins}

Under the direction of John Wesley Powell, the Bureau of American Ethnology was established in 1879 and became, with the Smithsonian’s National Museum, the key

\textsuperscript{146} Adam Clark Vroman to Gilbert H. Grosvenor, November 2, 1910, National Geographic Society Archive, National Geographic Society, Washington, DC.
institutional proponent of social evolutionary theory in the United States. Outlined in Lewis Henry Morgan’s 1877 Ancient Society, this idea sought to map the development of the human mind as it evolved from the meanest state of savagery, to middling barbarism, and finally to fully realized civilization. With man, in Powell’s words, “[e]mancipated from the cruel laws of brutality,” human evolution was intellectual, not biological, and this intellectual evolution was traceable through man’s inventions—“the works of his hand and mind.”  

While Powell concentrated on the development of language, Smithsonian Institution National Museum curator Otis Tufton Mason dedicated himself to the study of “art,” particularly to the evolution of applied technologies. To trace the development of highly evolved or civilized applied ideas, the curator looked to the industries of the “savage” to locate origins. As the mind of the savage had failed to evolve, Mason had ready comparative evidence in the static material record of ancient and contemporary indigenous communities. He concluded that

> the history of industry is the story of greater diversity of materials used, of the more complicated thought in the mind of the inventors, of the perfection of tools and processes, which take the place of hands and feet and brain, and, lastly, of the final causes of the products of men’s brains and hands.  

The issuance of a patent marked the brilliant conclusion of this story. Indeed, Mason noted that the savage form of a patent lay in the recognition of a technology’s “immediate and individual benefit.” Such recognition awarded the savage inventor with increased

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prestige, aggregation of wealth, and eventually a prominent position among his tribe. As the apex of civilized achievement, the modern patent represented not only the centuries-long development of applied technologies but served as evidence of the increasing mental faculties of man, as he progressed from savagery to civilization, in his mastery of nature. Photography fell outside of Mason’s particular scope of interest, but his emphases—greater diversity, expanded intellect, increasing perfection, mechanized production—mirrored the concerns of those who sought to trace the medium’s origins.

In March 1902, the Boston magazine *Photo Era*, which the year before had published a series of six articles by Vroman, issued a bibliography of literature from 1860 to 1901 that addressed the history of photography which the magazine considered essential for students. While the periodical articles on this list emphasize recent advances in technology, the books (all published in the last decade of the nineteenth century) are concerned with tracing the development of photography from its pre-history to its introduction into the written record—in other words, from savagery to civilization. In *The Evolution of Photography* (1890), for example, John Werge began an extensive chronology with the apparent discovery of iron in 1432 B.C.E. After 1839, the chronology becomes a litany of publications and patents, intended not only to elucidate the perfecting process of photography’s development but also to establish the genius and primacy of invention through 1889. Likewise, American George Iles’s *Flame, Electricity and the Camera* interlaced (as he put it) electricity with the camera and located the origin of both in the discovery of fire. Iles located the “threshold of photography,” the medium’s origin, in the impulse to create and then perfect the savage markings found in the material

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record. He noted that receding from “civilization to primeval savagery,” “the meaning of man’s mastery of electricity…shall [cast] light upon his earlier steps as a fire-kindler, and as a graver of pictures and symbols on bone and rock.”

Iles inextricably linked the emergence of electricity and camera images to the evolution of technology, naming them the two most important means by which man had sought to harness nature. Writing for an urban American audience, Englishman W. Jerome Harrison located photography’s origin in a lens “found among the ruins of Nineveh.” He explicitly reminded his readers that photography “[was] an evolutionary science” and “[t]he key to the proper comprehension of the present [lay] in the past.” Conceived in rigidly technological terms, his understanding of the medium was contingent on its evolution. With their competing claims for iron, fire and optics, however, these three examples make clear that there was little consensus in answering the fundamental question: from where had photography evolved?

Although the claims of invention made circa 1839 inaugurated photography’s entry into the historical field, by the late-nineteenth-century authors sought to account for the medium’s “earlier stages of life” and the circumstances under which it “passed from one phase to another.” Lacking a readily traceable narrative history, photography’s place in Western culture, much like meaning of the Snake Dance for Western observers, remained obscure. In a way, the accounts of photography’s origins were like those offered by the Hopi to an increasingly frustrated Fewkes: “When the priests were asked

150 George Iles, Flame, Electricity and the Camera: Man’s Progress from the First Kindling of Fire to the Wireless Telegraph and the Photography of Color (1900; New York: J. A. Hill and Company, 1904), 5.
the meaning of the Snake Ceremonial…they always referred to a strange legend of the adventures of a youth in the under-world…. This lore is the sole history which they have [of the dance].”\textsuperscript{153} Meaning and origin were inextricably linked. American social evolutionary theory provided a scientific framework for contemporaries to trace photography’s development through the material record and thereby to establish its history. Photography’s complexity, mechanization, patentability, and perfectibility proved it to be a highly evolved product of the civilized mind. But from where had it evolved?

As with the Snake Dance, photography’s origin remained elusive because contemporaries could not determine what it was. Doubt lingered as to photography’s stage of development. Some critics, including Harrison, identified photography “but as a little child,” a condition of the mind then associated with a savage stage of culture.\textsuperscript{154} Apparently uneasy with such an association, Werge contradicted himself within the course of a single sentence, arguing for the medium’s simultaneous state of infancy and maturity: “Photography, though young in years, is sufficiently aged to be in danger of having much of its early history, its infantile gambols, and vigorous growth, obscured or lost sight of in the glitter and reflection of the brilliant success which surrounds its maturity.”\textsuperscript{155} Was photography an infant or a mature visual medium? The location of photography’s origin depended on how the medium was defined at present. As the examples of Werge, Harrison, and Iles demonstrate, not only photography’s origin but also its very identity was elusive. What was photography? A science? An art? A mode of mechanical reproduction? In the nineteenth century, as both an advanced science and a

\textsuperscript{153} Fewkes, “The Snake Ceremonials at Walpi,” 106.
\textsuperscript{154} Harrison, \textit{A History of Photography}, 6.
\textsuperscript{155} Werge, \textit{The Evolution of Photography}, 1.
fledging form of art, the medium uneasily occupied two stages of culture. Photography was as civilized as it was savage. In his scientific endeavors, Vroman depended on highly evolved technology to render faithful, or objective, copies of nature. The very character of his photographic project thus relegated his photographs—the product of that civilized technology—to a primitive state of culture.
Chapter Two

The Enchanted Mesa, Myth, and Photography

At the same time Vroman was agitating for recognition from Fewkes, he succeeded in forming a productive—indeed, foundational—relationship with Frederick Webb Hodge, Fewkes’s colleague at the Bureau of American Ethnology. In the fall of 1897, Vroman sent platinum prints to both scientists: to Fewkes Snake Dance views and to Hodge landscape views. While Fewkes ignored Vroman (see chapter 1), Hodge received the prints gratefully and effusively. “My dear Vroman,” the ethnologist wrote,

A few days ago the second batch of platinum prints came and to say that they have been extraordinarily admired would be putting a discount on your beautiful work…. The Zuñi views are the finest I have ever seen, and hundreds have come under my observation. I value them all very highly, for they not only bring back with vividness our pleasant association last summer, but remind me also of the many happy days I spent at Zuñi and Acoma in 1888 & '89.156

Hodge told Vroman of his intention to bind the platinum prints into a special album. In response to the photographer’s request, he also mentioned his plans to send ethnographic publications for Vroman’s nascent scientific library. The ethnologist concluded his letter with an invitation. He asked if Vroman might accompany him the following summer, as official field photographer, to Acoma, Zuni, Inscription Rock, and the lava bed ruins of New Mexico.157

Vroman had already served Hodge—in an unofficial capacity—in the summer of 1897. In August of that year, after his excursion to Walpi to photograph the Snake Dance, Vroman traveled west from the Hopi mesas to Flagstaff to see the Walnut and Grand

156 Frederick Webb Hodge to Adam Clark Vroman, November 11, 1897, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
157 The two made this trip in the summer of 1899; it is a focus of chapter 3 of this dissertation.
Canyons. Consciously re-tracing the path of famous Smithsonian ethnologist Frank Hamilton Cushing, he caught a train to New Mexico and visited Zuni Pueblo before proceeding to Laguna Pueblo, after which he planned to travel to Acoma to photograph the Feast of Saint Stephen.\footnote{Vroman, “Three Week Trip of 1897 Through Arizona and New Mexico,” n.p., Cheryl Slyter Collection of A. C. Vroman, MI.} At Laguna, by coincidence, Vroman met Hodge, who, like the photographer, had attended the Snake Dance at Walpi in Arizona and was now also on his way to Acoma. Hodge, Vroman reported, “proposes to climb Katzimo having prepared Ladders Ropes Etc. prior to leaving Washington & proposed that Mr Hayt & I join him in the attempt which we gladly accept and also club together while at Acoma.”\footnote{Ibid., n.p.} Vroman photographed Hodge’s ascent and subsequent exploration of Katzimo, popularly known as the Enchanted Mesa.

Immediately after their shared venture, Hodge employed Vroman’s photographs—which he published in national and regional magazines and newspapers—to defend the veracity of the Acoma Indian oral tradition that identified the Enchanted Mesa as an ancestral home. More to the point, the photographs served to discredit an adversary who had publicly ridiculed the Smithsonian ethnologist for credulously accepting an indigenous “myth” as historical fact. When the photographs proved useful to his purpose, Hodge declared to Vroman that “everyone admires [your photographs] extravagantly and think [sic] with me that the gods favored me when you blew in at Laguna that night.”\footnote{Frederick Webb Hodge to Adam Clark Vroman, October 12, 1897, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.}

Vroman’s chance encounter with Hodge sparked Vroman’s scientific aspirations and proved formative to his photographic practice. The Enchanted Mesa controversy
encouraged Vroman to align his work with Smithsonian anthropology. But Hodge’s approach to proving the validity of the Enchanted Mesa oral tradition, particularly his use of photography, speaks to the shifting emphasis of turn-of-the-century anthropology in the United States. Vroman was making photographs at a moment when the theoretical foundation of Smithsonian anthropology was increasingly questioned. From the start, the scientific value of his photographs to the field of anthropology was uncertain.

By 1897, the year Hodge and Vroman scaled the Enchanted Mesa, Franz Boas, now recognized for professionalizing anthropology in the United States, had made headway in a decades-long effort to remove social evolutionary theory from American anthropological thought. Boas rejected the theory as a “vain endeavor to construct a uniform systematic history of the evolution of culture” predicated on the erroneous presumption that “the same ethnological phenomena are always due to the same causes.” Presupposing independent invention, adherents of social evolutionary theory cited superficial similarities in cultural manifestations (or ethnological phenomena) as evidence of evolutionary stages—savagery, barbarism, civilization—in the psychic development of man. Boas proposed to replace that approach with one more closely allied to the inductive, empirically grounded methods of the historian. Rejecting independent invention, he sought instead to trace the distribution, or diffusion, of cultural practices. He was interested in locating “the historical causes that led to the formation of the customs in question and to the psychological processes that were at work in their

development.” Instead of a unified diachronic cultural history of man, the result of Boas’s “historical method” would be synchronic “histories of the cultures of diverse tribes.” The study of oral traditions was central to Boas’s method and his critique of Smithsonian anthropology. In the context of Boas’s critique, it becomes evident that Hodge manipulated the ethnographic record (namely the nature of the oral tradition) in order to align the Enchanted Mesa legend more closely with the guiding principles of social evolutionary theory. Hodge’s strategy in turn made photography relevant to his arguments. However, photography’s role in the ascendant Boasian anthropology was uncertain. The medium’s limitation to the visible surface of its subjects—something on which social evolutionary theorists depended for comparisons of cultural phenomena—was insufficient evidence of the historical causes of and psychological significance ascribed to cultural materials and practices. Even as the field of anthropology came to reject social evolutionary theory and the emphasis on the visual, the field of photography, which itself was also professionalizing, continued to frame the development of the medium in social evolutionary terms. In these related contexts, Vroman’s photographic project in both fields was, from the start, beset with contradictions concerning its relevance to science and its relationship with art.

164 Ibid., 907.
165 In reference to Boas’s approach to indigenous oral tradition, George W. Stocking has argued that Boas’s critique of social evolutionary theory was fundamentally an effort to address and redress the racism inherent in the theory. See his “From Physics to Ethnology,” in Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology (1968; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 133–160.
Charles Fletcher Lummis Sets the Stage

Hodge first learned of the Acoma Indians’ claims to have occupied the Enchanted Mesa in Adolph Francis Bandelier’s 1892 *Final Report of Investigations Among the Southwestern United States*. However, before that scientific study appeared, the influential Charles Fletcher Lummis had published the tradition twice, in 1885 and 1890.\(^\text{166}\) From September 1884 to February 1885, Lummis walked from Cincinnati to Los Angeles, where he had accepted a position at the *Los Angeles Times*. During his travels, he sent regular dispatches to the Cincinnati newspaper *Chillicothe Leader*; in one of those, a letter dated December 12, 1884, appeared the first recorded account of the Enchanted Mesa tradition. There he described the circumstances under which the Acoma came to occupy the now-unscalable Enchanted Mesa, the violent storm that destroyed the mesa village and washed away the trail to it, and the subsequent construction and habitation of modern-day Acoma village. In 1890, he published the tradition for a second time in *St. Nicholas*, a children’s magazine, with accompanying illustrations. By that time, having suffered a stroke in Los Angeles, he had lived in Isleta Pueblo, New Mexico, for about two years and was quickly establishing a reputation as a tireless promoter of the Southwest and an outspoken defender of the region’s indigenous peoples.

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\(^{166}\) A letter from Hodge to Lummis makes clear that Lummis was concerned to establish his precedence over Bandelier in having discovered the oral tradition: “Mr. McGee’s reference in ‘Science’ to Bandelier, giving him [Bandelier] credit for the story, was all my own fault. I had forgotten that you had recorded the tradition until two or three days after my return when I looked the matter up and corrected it as best I could in what has been written since. I was not aware, however, that you published a synopsis of the story in ’85; the earliest one I have is in St Nicholas 1890. Where did the ’85 article appear? I want it. Please change the reference in the paper I sent you, to suit, and make any other additions or corrections you want to. You should have full credit everywhere for the find, and I am sure Bandelier always wanted to give credit to everybody. Mr. McGee’s ‘Science’ note was prepared the day I returned. I doubtless got the impression that the tradition was recorded by B. because I first read it in his Report.” See Frederick Webb Hodge to Charles Fletcher Lummis, October 1, 1897, Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
Lummis’s *St. Nicholas* account anticipates the ambiguities central to the 1897 controversy incited by both Hodge and Lummis. “The Enchanted Mesa: A Legend of New Mexico in the Fifteenth Century” seems at first to be a fictional tale about a boy who helplessly witnessed the destruction of his village—A-chi-te, fifteen years old, with an athletic body and “a face of remarkable strength and beauty, despite the swarthy skin.”¹⁶⁷ But in the conclusion, Lummis made clear that A-chi-te was a historical figure and the Enchanted Mesa the actual scene of the boy’s heroics. Lummis maintained that “[s]cientific expeditions have exhausted the ingenuity of civilization to scale the Rock of Katzímo [i.e., the Enchanted Mesa] and recover its archaeological treasures. The natives shunned it, believing it accursed.”¹⁶⁸ Switching from the third- to the first-person voice in the final paragraph, Lummis concluded,

> [a]nd to-day, as I sit on the rocky battlements of the Acoma that now is, watching the sunset glory creeping higher up that wondrous island of ruddy rock to the north, an old Indian at my side tells the oft-repeated story of the Enchanted Mesa. He is the many-times-great-grandson of A-chi-te.¹⁶⁹

With this, acting as an arbiter of indigenous oral tradition, Lummis introduced A-chi-te into the historical record as an authentic figure. More importantly, he testified to the historical accuracy of a tradition—as yet unverified by modern science—that traced the migration of the Acoma Indians from the Enchanted Mesa to the contemporary village. Because of the Acoma’s lack of a written history, which the author himself redressed through his publication, the lesson of the tale appeared to be the historical validity of the oral tradition.

¹⁶⁷ Charles Fletcher Lummis, “The Enchanted Mesa: A Legend of New Mexico in the Fifteenth Century,” *St. Nicholas* 17, no. 3 (Jan. 1890): 207–212.
¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 212.
¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 212.
If Lummis’s conclusion underscores the historical authenticity of Native oral tradition, so too do the illustrations that accompanied the children’s story. Lummis’s prose provides vivid descriptions of A-chi-te’s physical appearance and of his treacherous descent from the top of the mesa during the cataclysm; however, the illustrations do not elucidate or dramatize the actions of the human protagonist. With a photograph, taken by the author, and a wood engraving made after another of his photographs, Lummis instead depicted the tale’s true hero: the Enchanted Mesa (Figs. 19 and 20). In “The Rock of Katzimo,” the Enchanted Mesa towers above the valley, a distant and formidable rock wall imbued with mystical power by the Acoma. By choosing photographic illustrations, Lummis appealed to period perceptions of the objectivity of photography. Through the medium, he underscored the actual existence of the Enchanted Mesa and the validity of the legend associated with it.

Lummis’s St. Nicholas account straddles genres, presenting the tradition both as a fictional tale and a historically grounded legend. The Enchanted Mesa’s debut in scholarly discourse in 1892 points to the difficulty scientists faced in assessing and categorizing indigenous oral traditions, especially when those traditions proved useful to the field. In his report of 1892, Bandelier, citing the “folk-lore tale” reported to him by Lummis, identified the Enchanted Mesa as “the last [i.e., penultimate] settlement of the Acoma.” The two had met while Lummis lived in the territory, and Lummis

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occasionally accompanied the archaeologist into the field. In the report, Bandelier noted that, though “utterly inaccessible,” the mesa’s “appearance and the amount of detritus accumulated around its base give some color to the legend.” In his reference to the Acoma oral tradition as both a folktale and a legend, Bandelier was using terms interchangeably that by 1892 already had some specificity of meaning. “Folklore” generally described popular traditions that circulated orally, while “legend” applied to Western written traditions that had been verified in the archaeological record and had thereby accumulated historical legitimacy. Distinct from both, and important to the Enchanted Mesa debate, “mythology” circulated orally (like folklore) but represented belief systems that explained existence. Although Bandelier conflated, even confused, “folklore” with “legend,” Hodge was clear. He set out to prove the Acoma oral tradition a legend through an investigation of the archaeological record.

The Interloper: William Libbey Climbs the Enchanted Mesa

In July 1897, William John McGee, Ethnologist-in-Charge of the Bureau, ordered Hodge to western New Mexico to make a study of the ruins in Cebollita Valley and then to “continue to Laguna and there outfit [himself] for a journey to the pueblo of Acoma for the purpose of making as complete an examination as possible of the ‘Enchanted Mesa,’

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174 In 1888, the newly-established American Folklore Society published the first volume of the Journal of American Folk-Lore and in the second issue of the first volume the editors sought to clarify the journal’s scope and purpose. For the definitions provided above see “Folk-lore and Mythology,” Journal of American Folklore 1 (July-Sept. 1888): 163. Brad Evans has demonstrated how turn-of-the-century interest in collecting folklore worked to undermine the Bureau of American Ethnology’s theory of race. See chapter two of his Before Cultures: The Ethnographic Imagination in American Literature, 1865–1920 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
near that village, with a view of determining whether or not it was prehistorically occupied.”

McGee originally approached Hodge’s investigation of the mesa with the objectivity of a scientist—again, Hodge was to determine “whether or not it was prehistorically occupied” (emphasis added). Yet McGee discarded all such pretense after an unanticipated independent interloper, William Libbey, reached and explored the summit before Hodge. The Princeton University geologist reported finding no evidence of former occupancy. In national and local news outlets, Libbey dismissed the “romantic legend” as nothing more than a “fairy tale.”

McGee must have been alarmed. “I have read various newspaper accounts of the work on the Acoma reservation,” he informed Hodge, “and am by no means satisfied with the results…. [Y]our testimony will be required to set the matter at rest.” With this, McGee charged Hodge with no small undertaking, enlisting his ethnologist to defend a contentious Bureau practice that identified indigenous oral traditions as reasons to advance scientific inquiry. In preparation for his counterattack, Hodge added a Kodak camera to his arsenal.

He was undoubtedly relieved when he could dispense with the Kodak because the adept Vroman agreed to accompany him to Acoma and serve as Enchanted Mesa photographer with a view camera.

On June 19, 1897, the Boston Evening Transcript announced Libbey’s forthcoming venture to the Enchanted Mesa, noting that three years prior “Mr. Hodge of the Bureau of Ethnology” had attempted to summit the mesa, getting within fifteen feet

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177 William John McGee to F. W. Hodge, August 7, 1897, Letterbook 29, Bureau of American Ethnology Records, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

178 William John McGee to F. W. Hodge, August 30, 1897, Letterbook 29, Bureau of American Ethnology Records, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
of the summit, but had been “brought to a final pause by a sheer wall of smooth rock.”

“Government ethnologists,” the newspaper declared, were therefore “much interested” in Libbey’s project to solve “the mystery of a wonderful lost city in New Mexico.”

In July, Libbey successfully scaled the mesa and made a “careful search” of “[e]very portion of the fifteen or sixteen acres” of the table, reporting early on that he had found “not the slightest trace” of evidence of prehistoric occupancy. About a month later, in his hometown newspaper, Libbey summarized his findings:

For two hours I walked over the surface of the rock…. It is a splendid site for a pueblo…but could not have been freer of all traces of former occupation if it had been thoroughly swept the day before. Only once was it that a doubt crossed my mind, when I came across a cairnlike monument which looked as though it might have been constructed by human hands. But the possibility of its being the result of erosion is also quite as strong as the other. No bits of pottery, no broken household utensils of any sort, no traces of construction of any sort were visible….

He dismissed the legend as a “medicine man’s myth.”

In his original press release, Libbey referred to “precious” photographs made during his investigation of the mesa. These first appeared in the August 28, 1897, issue of Harper’s Weekly (Fig. 21). As Lummis was quick to note, the content of the photographs failed to provide visual evidence supporting Libbey’s claims against prehistoric occupancy. Rather, the photographs emphasized Libbey’s “athletico-scientific

179 “Enchanted Table-Land,” Boston Evening Transcript (June 19, 1897) in Charles Fletcher Lummis, “The Enchanted Mesa” Scrapbook, Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA. Lummis’s scrapbook demonstrate his vested interest in the Enchanted Mesa controversy as well as his malicious propensities. Scattered throughout his scrapbook are collodion prints of Vroman’s photographs, the versos of which were largely annotated by Hodge. An amateur photographer himself, Lummis’s own photographs appear alongside Vroman’s.


feat” in scaling the mesa. The Princeton geologist did in fact seem to be most concerned to relay the method of his ascent. By comparison, he paid his archaeological observations scant attention. In the Princeton Press and other news outlets, he talked at length about the perilous features of the mesa and his climbing equipment, particularly the pulley system he devised to “skyrocket” himself upward. He enthusiastically and repeatedly reported that he had used a cannon to shoot line into the rock wall. The halftone reproductions in Harper’s depict Libbey’s cannon and pulley system as well as the web of ropes running up the “south point” of the mesa. The images of the face and summit of the Enchanted Mesa—imposing, precipitous, rugged—underscore his engineering feat. Read alongside the sarcastic narrative, the photographs suggest that Libbey had harnessed the ingenuity of Western science to expose the credulity of those who, like the “keen-eyed [children] of nature,” accepted the veracity of the Enchanted Mesa tradition. The “medicine man of the future,” he declared, “will now have to publish a new and revised edition of the story.” Implicit here is an indictment of learned men, like Hodge, Lummis, or Bandelier, who interpreted the tradition as anything more than a myth.

Hodge Strikes Back

In a vituperative assault on Libbey in the November 1897 issue of Land of Sunshine, Lummis praised Vroman and implied that the geologist’s photographs were scientifically irrelevant. For Lummis, editor of the influential magazine since 1894, “Mr. Vroman’s

deadly photograph[s]” of the Enchanted Mesa exposed Libbey as “the most unfortunate pretender in the history of American science.”  

On September 1, with two Laguna men serving as guides, Hodge, United States surveyor George H. Pradt, Vroman, and Vroman’s friend H. C. Hayt, had wended their way southwest from Laguna toward the Acoma Valley. Armed with a thirty-six foot ladder and 300 feet of rope, the team successfully ascended the rock wall and spent several days atop the mesa collecting ancient potsherds and recording archaeological observations and geographical data. Vroman’s photographs proved most useful in the subsequent counter-offensive launched by Hodge (and Lummis) against Libbey in the popular press.

Hodge published his account, illustrated with Vroman’s photographs, in several national magazines. The contents of these accounts are all nearly identical, with *National Geographic Magazine* being the most scientific venue. The first image in the *National Geographic* article, plate 32, faces the opening page, acting as a kind of frontispiece (Fig. 22). The image depicts the four members of the expedition party and one Laguna Indian guide at the foot of the Enchanted Mesa; Vroman is at the center. The ladders with which they reached the summit are featured in the foreground. The ladders were an important part of Hodge’s expedition narrative; his ascent recreated the method by which ancient Indians had also scaled the mesa, in contrast to Libbey who had shot a cannon equipped with cord at the mighty rock wall. But most significant here is the talus heap, also noted

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185 [Charles Fletcher Lummis], “In the Lion’s Den,” *Land of Sunshine* (Nov. 1897) in Charles Fletcher Lummis, “The Enchanted Mesa” Scrapbook, Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.

in the caption. On its own the talus, a pile of rock debris covered over by centuries-old plant growth, is hardly distinguishable as a feature of the photograph or indeed of the landscape. Though distant, the talus heap is nevertheless at the center of the composition. According to Hodge, the talus itself corroborated the Acoma legend that a great “convulsion of nature” had freed “an immense rocky mass from the friable wall of the cliff, destroying the only trail to the summit.”

Plate 33 of the National Geographic article likewise provided visual evidence of the Acoma legend (Fig. 23). Situated just above the talus, the “great sandstone cleft” represented where the “ancient pathway was reputed to have wound.” Hodge reported that he found “fragments of pottery of very ancient type, some of which were decorated in a vitreous glaze, an art now lost to Pueblo potters” along this trail. In addition, the weathered rocky pathway exhibited a “regular series of pecked holes” that had served the ancient Acoma as anchor points for their wooden ladders. In this plate, it is impossible to see Hodge’s evidence; however, in another illustration, figure 2 of the article, Hodge offers one of Vroman’s photographs as irrefutable proof of surviving material culture left by the ancients (Fig. 24). Libbey had dismissed as a product of erosion the cairn depicted in figure 2. Libbey had neglected to photograph (or at least to publish photographs of) his wandering atop the mesa, and so Hodge was able to assert that “only a glance [at the accompanying illustration] is necessary to determine beyond all doubt that pile could not have been erected save by the hand of man.”

188 Ibid., 274.
189 Ibid., 278.
190 Ibid., 280.
Libbey’s primary argument against the ancient habitation of the Enchanted Mesa was that he had found no ruined pueblos there. Hodge countered that the ancient people most likely had not made their homes from rock but from “sun-baked mudballs.” Over the course of generations, abandoned adobe houses would not have withstood the wind and rain that swept across the mesa’s summit. Moreover, the Pueblo still preferred building their homes of mud. Hodge offered the rather bland scene depicted in plate 34—scrubby bushes surrounded by sandy, desert soil—as “ready” evidence “that the film of soil that still remains [on the mesa] occurs in places that would have afforded the best sites for dwellings” (Fig. 25). Not only had Hodge provided evidence of the antiquity of the pathway but through his familiarity with Pueblo Indian practices and desert geology he also made the argument that the Enchanted Mesa was habitable.

Hodge’s National Geographic narrative and his interpretation of Vroman’s photographs suggest that he was primarily concerned with scientifically proving the truth of the Enchanted Mesa legend. But his key objective was in fact to defend the practice of using indigenous oral traditions—legends—to advance scientific inquiry. Seemingly counter to his empirical approach, he did this by restoring a mystical quality to the desert landscape, something that Libbey had derided in press accounts. At the beginning of the article, Hodge associated the mesa and its surrounding landscape with religious architecture: “Stretching away for miles lies a beautiful level plain clothed in grama and bound on every side by mesas of variegated sandstone rising precipitously from 300 to 400 feet, and relieved by minarets and pinnacles and domes and many other features of

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191 Ibid., 279.
192 Ibid., 279.
nature’s architecture.” This finds a certain correspondence in Vroman’s photographs. As depicted in the photograph “Enchanted Mesa from the South,” the mesa becomes a kind of cathedral tower (Fig. 26). The mesa’s sacred spires, Hodge made clear, functioned as an active Acoma pilgrimage site, shrouded in religious mystery. While scouting around the foot of the mesa, Hodge located four oak sticks, a sherd of contemporary Acoma pottery, and a prayer stick, all of which “confirmed immediately” that sacrificial offerings had recently been made by the Acoma. Finally, according to Hodge, three distinguished Acoma men joined the expedition party on the summit of the mesa. Although initially angry with the expedition’s intrusion on their sacred site, the Acoma—along with the white scientists—were eager to find corroborating “scientific” evidence of the mesa’s former occupancy and participated in locating ancient potsherds of their people. Hodge reported that an Acoma “medicine man” uncovered a white stone ax, which he “refused to part with...and desired to keep [for] ceremonial use.” He thus concluded that “[t]o the Acomas Katzímo is still enchanted, and as a subject in the study of mysticism the man of science must yet regard it.” The Enchanted Mesa was a place the Acoma had inhabited “during their wanderings from the mystic [opening in the earth] in the far north to their present day lofty dwelling place.” “Native tradition, as distinguished from myth,” Hodge wrote, “may usually be relied on even to the extent of

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193 Ibid., 273.
194 Ibid., 282.
disproving or verifying that which purports to be historical testimony.”

Hodge endeavored to restore “myth” to “legend,” but, more to the point, shored up the reputation of the science Libbey had disparaged.

In his popular accounts of the ascent, Hodge never mentioned Libbey by name; on the other hand, Lummis, Hodge’s partner in the discrediting Libbey, demonstrated none of the composure required of a Smithsonian scientist. Lummis’s direct language more clearly reveals Hodge’s primary aim. In the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Lummis asserted that the “important result of the whole affair” was not to confound Libbey but rather to defend the “new substantiation of the attitude of scientific research” in which “Indian legends” were understood to be “quite as trustworthy as the testimony of a reliable travel book.” He continued:

> An exploding of the “myth” of the Enchanted Mesa would not, of course, have vitiated this truth, based on wide experience; but there is a rested feeling among scientists that even this one folk-story has been fully substantiated, right on the heels of an amateur attempt to discredit it. The legend I heard repeatedly from the lips of the oldest and gravest principes of [Acoma], and published it years ago as a legend, but with due insistence upon its credibility. Now it passes from folklore to history—thanks wholly to Mr. Hodge, whose ascent of the rock took a very different kind of courage from Professor Libbey’s.

With this, Lummis claimed for himself the role of chronicler or scribe—a self-appointed historian—for the Acoma. Hodge verified a legend Lummis had been responsible for publishing as a text. Together, the two admitted the Acoma to the historical record.

Hodge’s and Lummis’s ambitions at first appear to run counter to established historical practice, which dismissed oral traditions as illegitimate sources. By the end of

196 Ibid., 274.
197 The letters exchanged between Hodge and Lummis in which they planned to discredit Libbey are highly entertaining. See Charles Fletcher Lummis Papers and Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
the nineteenth-century, history was defined as a text-based empirical discipline. Steven Conn has demonstrated that nineteenth-century Euro-American scholars located indigenous oral traditions—relegated to “myth”—firmly outside of the historical record. History, Conn notes, was thought to move, evolve, and exist in the “flow of time; myth, on the other hand, was understood to be static and to have no relation, therefore, to history.” Without a written history, American Indians were treated “ahistorically, or outside the boundaries of any specific chronology”—in other words, outside of history. The Enchanted Mesa episode should not be read as an early attempt to redress that point of view. Rather, the controversy demonstrates efforts in the United States to search out a distinctly American past, one on equal footing with and relevant to European archaeological discourses. In Europe, unlike in the United States, archaeology was a historical discipline that, following the example of Heinrich Schliemann, used ancient texts as the foundation for archaeological inquiry. The publication and subsequent verification of the Acoma tradition contrived to emulate the European model, but the underlying assumptions of both Hodge and Lummis were firmly planted in the American anthro-archaeological tradition. As Bruce Trigger notes, in the United States the perceived evolutionary stasis of indigenous people meant that “nothing could be learned from archaeological data that could not be ascertained more easily by means of ethnographic research.” The “sun-baked mudballs” Hodge mentioned in his *National Geographic* article, for example, he knew to have been reported as building materials by Spanish explorers in the sixteenth century. Hodge’s familiarity with contemporary

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200 Ibid., 22–23.
Puebloan material culture—which was equivalent to that of the past—and the historic record left by the Spanish allowed him to interpret the traces of the ancient Acoma he found atop the Enchanted Mesa.

Hodge’s use of Vroman’s photographs corresponds with observations made by Jennifer Tucker regarding the role of photographs in late-nineteenth-century science. Like Tucker’s scientists of the invisible, such as bacteriologists or meteorologists, Hodge used Vroman’s photographs to report and publicize his research and discoveries in publications (and lantern slide lectures). Likewise, Vroman’s photographs of the Enchanted Mesa did not work to shore up Hodge’s authority; rather, Hodge’s authority—his ability to interpret the visual information conveyed by the photograph—imbued Vroman’s photographs with scientific, evidentiary value.

That said, photographic evidence was relevant to Hodge’s defense of the tradition only because he suppressed an aspect of the tradition that would have undermined its provability. Lummis and Hodge both refrained from publishing a full account of the Enchanted Mesa legend in order to bend the tradition to their purpose. In the National Geographic article, Hodge mentioned, but probably for strategic reasons did not explicate, that the Enchanted Mesa was a place the Acoma had inhabited “during their wanderings from the mystic [opening in the earth] in the far north to their present day lofty dwelling place.” The two excerpted what they identified as a “legend” from the creation myth of the Acoma. In doing so, they aligned the Acoma with a concept of history consistent with the tenets of social evolutionary theory. Rather than approach the

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Enchanted Mesa legend within the totality of a mythological cycle—as evidence of the cultural growth of the myth and therefore the cultural history of the Acoma—Hodge and Lummis suppressed the relationship. For a social evolutionary theorist, a creation myth could serve only as an example of an “independent invention” of a primitive mind to explain a phenomenon of nature (here the creation of man). As such, a myth was wholly fanciful and therefore unlikely to contain elements that also constituted a history of a given tribe. For the Enchanted Mesa tradition to serve their purpose, Hodge and Lummis required it to be a legend in the Western-historical sense and therefore solidly verifiable in the historico-archaeological record. In doing so, they implicitly denied Franz Boas’s claim for the historical complexity of Native oral traditions.

Hodge’s approach to the tradition was antithetical to that proposed by Boas. Boas identified folklore, particularly mythology, as “traditional material” on equal footing with Western philosophy. As he noted:

> It would be in vain to try to understand the development of modern science without an intelligent understanding of modern philosophy…. to try to understand the history of mediaeval science without an intelligent knowledge of mediaeval theology…. [and] primitive science without an intelligent knowledge of primitive mythology. 204

In “primitive” and “civilized” cultures, traditional materials were acquired, handed down (both consciously and unconsciously) from generation to generation, and thus provided the organizing structure by which an individual within a particular culture understood and interpreted the world. Moreover, traditional materials in primitive and civilized cultures were dynamic. Looking to folklore, Boas demanded that the same complexity attributed to the dissemination of the tales of the Old World—“carried from east to west, and from south to north, from book to the folk, and from the folk to books”—be recognized in

those of the New World. He admitted that, knowing “only the present folk-lore of each tribe,” scholars dedicated to the study of primitive peoples were deprived of the “valuable literary means” by which their European counterparts traced the diffusion of tales on that continent. Nevertheless, Boas argued, anthropologists must recognize the myth in its present form as the culmination of a complex historical growth, having “undergone material change by disintegration and by accretion of foreign material, so that the original underlying idea is, at best, much obscured.”

Comparisons of indigenous North American mythologies revealed that all shared common elements. The greater the number of shared elements in separate tribal mythologies, Boas observed, the closer in proximity the tribes lived to one another. Likewise, shared elements between geographically distant tribes could be traced by the discovery of “channels,” such as trade routes, “through which a tale flowed.” He doubted that myths could be interpreted as independent inventions by primitive minds attempting to understand the phenomena of nature, as social evolutionary theorists had done to characterize a savage or barbaric state of culture.

In an essay on Boas’s relationship with photography, Ira Jacknis notes the inherent contradiction in Boas’s approach to the study of man. Despite Boas’s opposition to social evolutionary theory, he “accepted its basic assumption that human culture was the product of a long period of change and development.” Boas objected to the comparative method’s emphasis on the appearance of things. The physical characteristics

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207 Ibid., 9.
208 Ibid., 9.
of a “primitive” object ought not to be compared to a similar “civilized” object. What mattered for Boas was not the physicality of objects of material culture but the significance attributed to the objects “through the thoughts that cluster around them.”

Restricting the role of the visible, of which photography was a part, he defined anthropology primarily as a psychological science. “For Boas,” Jacknis writes, “psychology and history were ultimately one.” The difficulty in Boas’s method lay in the desire to collect traditional culture which could not be observed but was extant in memory. In short, because the history of the operations of the human mind was knowable only through the medium of language, Boas recorded and studied the diffusion of oral traditions such as myths. Jacknis summarizes: “Because words could be carried in the memory after their referents in the physical world were long gone, texts were the only medium for a historically oriented anthropology.” In Boasian anthropology, photography could not function as evidence of the history of a culture.

Although Vroman was surely ignorant of Boas’s assessment, in 1899 the anthropologist singled out one of Vroman’s photographs in the first issue of the new series of the journal American Anthropologist. Writing to Hodge, Boas expressed his opinion that the issue had been “too liberal” in its illustrations. To keep down costs, he recommended for the future jettisoning images like those reproduced on plates eight, nine, and ten. These were all portraits of Native people and included a portrait Vroman had made in 1898 of Kopeli, a member of the Snake Clan from Walpi village (Fig. 27). Vroman evidently sent the portrait to Fewkes, who in turn reproduced the photograph.

211 Jacknis, “Boas and Photography,” 44.
212 Ibid., 45.
213 Ibid., 47.
214 Ibid., 48–49.
(without Vroman’s knowledge) to accompany an obituary for Kopeli, who had died of smallpox. Vroman’s portrait of Kopeli is exemplary of most of Vroman’s portraits of indigenous people. But Boas’s concerns were not merely financial. He questioned the portraits’ value to science, noting that such photographs, particularly those made in the Southwest, were commonplace and failed to “illustrate some sort of scientific information.” Vroman’s photograph did not add appreciably to the acquisition or communication of scientific ideas.

Vroman recognized and embraced the authority Hodge lent to his photographs; the relationship Vroman forged with Hodge in 1897 was formative to his photographic practice and to his conceptualization of his photographs. From then until his final trip to the Southwest in 1904, he corresponded and collaborated with Hodge and strove to create a body of work that would serve the needs of other Smithsonian scientists in addition to Fewkes and Hodge (see chapters 1 and 3). He came to define and frame his work in scientific terms. This is particularly evident in the six articles he published in 1901 in Photo Era. In these articles, Vroman punctuated his narratives with anecdotes for the would-be camera-toting tourist, but he mostly dedicated himself to summarizing the anthropological and historical scholarship of recognized, largely Smithsonian, authorities. No where did he attempt to synthesize his approach to picture-making in the Southwest. The article “Katzimo, the En-chanted Mesa” makes this clear. There he

215 Franz Boas to Frederick Webb Hodge, March 11, 1899, Franz Boas Papers, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.
216 For example, in “The Moki Pueblos” Vroman admonishes his reader not to rush a potential Hopi subject. Rather, “sit down with him, show him the camera inside and out, stand on your head (on the ground-glass) for him, or anything you want him to do, and he will do the same for you.” In Zuni, on the other hand, the pueblo is “full of interesting bits for the camerist [sic], although the natives may hide their faces or sometimes even slam the door rudely in one’s face, yet, with a little patience and diplomacy, one will secure enough to make his set of photographs interesting.” See Adam Clark Vroman, “The Moki Pueblos,” Photo Era 6, no. 2 (Feb. 1901): 270 and “The Pueblo of Zuni,” Photo Era 7, no. 2 (July 1901): 61.
reproduced four views without comment and instead retraced Lummis’s introduction of
the legend to the written record and Hodge’s investigations of and discoveries on the
mesa. Vroman allowed the authority of science not simply to speak for but to provide
the interpretive framework for the photographs. Their significance, to Vroman, was
contingent upon their relationship to the discourses of science. However, as the
Enchanted Mesa controversy also demonstrates, the anthropological foundation upon
which Vroman built his photographic practice was shifting. The controversy speaks to the
problem of photographic evidence in the changing field.

For Boas the tenants of social evolutionary theory were unfounded, but in
photographic circles the theory was hopeful, promising an evolution in photography
marked by increased complexity and specialization. In allying himself with science,
Vroman at first glance appears to have defined his practice in terms consistent with those
laid out in Peter Henry Emerson’s *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art*
(1889). In that highly influential volume, whose reception among American
photographers is apparent in the trade literature, Emerson rejected the notion that
photography was an “art-science.” He instead called for distinct photographies of art and
science and outlined categorical divisions in photographic practice. Citing Herbert
Spencer, Emerson used the language of social evolutionary theory to make his point.
Without differentiation or specialization, the field, he argued, would continue in its
current state of developmental stasis. It would falter as a science and fail as an art. To
overcome these pitfalls, Emerson argued, the serious photographer must devote himself
with a “singlemindedness” of purpose to not more than one branch of the field, which he
divided thusly: art, science, and industry. The aim of the science division would be to

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“investigate the phenomena of nature, and by experiment to make new discoveries, and corroborate or falsify old experiments.” Emerson envisioned the “workers” in this field dedicating themselves to a sub-division (consistent with the increased specialization in the sciences), which might include astronomers, engineers, geologists, medical, and—important for Vroman—anthropologists. He concluded, however, that these workers must consist of a “vast host of trained scientific men who are photographers in connection with their work.”

Vroman was trained neither in photography nor in anthropology. Where might that leave a photographer like Vroman? To Emerson’s way of thinking, he was consigned to the rank of amateur. Emerson identified the amateur as the prime offender in impeding photography’s progress. He was no longer a gentleman, as in photography’s early years, but “a dabbler without aim, without thorough knowledge, and often without capacity.”

In his attempt to make a body of anthropological work, Vroman revealed himself—indeed eventually recognized himself—to be that amateur.

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219 Ibid., 13.
Chapter Three

The Amateur Photographer as Primitive

On August 1, 1901, from an encampment in Jedditch, Arizona Territory, Vroman wrote to his bookstore assistant in Pasadena with instructions to acquire and send Mexican silver dollars. He explained, “[I] want [a] Navaho Silversmith to do some work for me.” The Mexican silver was to serve not as payment but as raw material for a commission. Before the work began, Vroman made a portrait of the artist with one of the coins (Fig. 28). Identified by Vroman as Ha-kah-e-to-he, the Navajo silversmith evidently used the coin to make a bracelet for his patron. As a collector, Vroman often commissioned work from Native artists. For this job, however, he had greater ambitions. With two cameras, view and handheld, Vroman made a series of photographs titled “A Navaho Silversmith at Work” (Fig. 29). The craftsman is depicted melting the silver, heating and molding the bar, and shaping the bracelet. The photographs of Ha-kah-e-to-he represent a new approach to the depiction of Navajo silversmiths.

The art of Navajo silversmiths had been of interest to scholars for many years. For example, in 1883, Washington Matthews, a United States Army doctor, had published what his contemporaries recognized as a seminal report on the subject. At the same time, photographers such as Ben Wittick began to make studio portraits of smiths with the tools of their craft (Fig. 30). A decade later, Smithsonian ethnologist James Mooney

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220 Adam Clark Vroman to Montford Thomas Bufkin, August 1, 1901, Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, CA.
221 A set of eleven concho buttons is the only example of Navajo silver work in Vroman’s object collection. See the A. C. Vroman Memorial Collection, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
photographed several prominent practitioners of the art in situ, including the famous Peshlakai seated before his hogan (hut) as he hammered a piece of silver (Fig. 31, left).\textsuperscript{223}

Against this background, the distinguishing feature of Vroman’s series is its simultaneous attention to the processes, implements, and haunts of the Navajo silversmith. In 1883, Matthews reproduced a wood engraving after a photograph of the “workshop” of a silversmith (Fig. 32).\textsuperscript{224} Made in the interior of a Navajo hogan, its content likely augmented by the engraver, the image shows neatly arranged implements, each of which Matthews identified as essential to the process. “Their tools and materials are few and simple,” Matthews wrote, “and rude as the results of their labor may appear, it is surprising that they do so well with such imperfect appliances, which usually consist of the following articles: A forge, a bellows, an anvil, crucibles, molds, tongs, scissors…[etc.].”\textsuperscript{225} Although Matthews surmised that the Navajo smithed long before Europeans arrived in North America, he recognized that the recent adoption of tools procured from Americans, such as scissors, greatly improved the art. The products of the contemporary silversmith not only demonstrated the Navajo artist’s “inventive and imitative talents,” they also revealed, despite “elements of…recent origins,” the “art of the metalist in the prehistoric days of our continent.”\textsuperscript{226} Possibly by design, Vroman’s version of the Navajo’s workshop closely resembles the composition of Matthews’s engraving, although in terms of content it is lacking essential accoutrements, namely those most recognizable as of Western manufacture (Fig. 33). In a departure from his

\begin{footnotes}
\item[223] Peshlakai was one of the most important silversmiths of his generation; he also participated in the 1893 Chicago World’s Columbian Exhibition. See Curtis M. Hinsley, “Anthropology as Education and Entertainment: Frederic Ward Putnam at the World’s Fair, in Coming of Age in Chicago, ed. by Curtis M. Hinsley and David R. Wilcox (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 39–40.
\item[224] The remaining plates in the Matthews report consist of renderings of tools and objects as well as a wood engraved portrait, possibly after a photograph, of a Navajo man wearing “silver ornaments.”
\item[225] Matthews, “Navajo Silversmiths,” 172.
\item[226] Ibid., 178.
\end{footnotes}
predecessors, including Matthews, Vroman moved beyond just picturing the tools of the craft or the craftsman with his tools. Instead, with his camera close to and at the same height as his seated subject, Vroman demonstrated the way in which Ha-kah-e-to-he used his implements throughout the process of manipulating silver. What is more, Vroman photographed the silversmith not outside of his workshop, as was common, but inside and “crouch[ed] on the ground,” which for Euro-Americans was a distinguishing feature of Navajo working methods. For Matthews, as for Vroman, the Navajo silversmith’s mode of artistic production had not evolved. Living and working in cultural stasis, the “inventive and imitative talents” of the contemporary indigenous artist were representative of those of prehistoric man. Vroman’s thorough documentation of Ha-kah-e-to-he at work, one attentive to visual and textual precedents, reflects his recent interests creating photographic work in aid of theories that identified contemporary indigenous art as a product of the primitive mind.

As elucidated above (chapter 1), the Smithsonian established the American school of anthropology on the premise of social evolutionary theory, and adherents to that theory looked to the products of man, both material and intellectual, in order to trace the development of the human mind from the state of lowliest savagery to middling barbarism and highest civilization. The theoretical model applied equally to artistic production, the civilized culmination of which was Western fine art and the expression of an aesthetic sensibility. Western art was understood to represent the zenith of cultural development, having long since evolved through the primitive stages of savagery and barbarism. In 1885, John Wesley Powell, head of the Bureau of American Ethnology, identified “the genius of the savage mind” as the recognition of the hand not as a “paw”

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but as an “organ for fashioning” artistic inventions.\textsuperscript{228} Barbarians continued to use the “simple materials of nature” but improved savage inventions “often with great skill.”\textsuperscript{229} The minds of the savage and the barbarian were, however, incapable of imaginative thought.

In search of a useable, relevant, and distinctly American past, scholars were anxious to insert the indigenous art of the continental United States into the developmental scheme of Western fine art.\textsuperscript{230} They argued that the advantage of studying the art of the American Indian over the well-established study of ancient Greece, Egypt, and the Far East was that “the dawn of art in these countries lies hidden in the shadow of unnumbered ages, while ours stands out in the light of the very present.”\textsuperscript{231} While the artistic products of the ancient Greek potter, for example, served as evidence of an early stage of art, the potter and the circumstances in which he plied his craft had long since vanished. In addition, art in Greece and other parts of the Western world had continued to evolve, such that tracing its development was perceived by scholars as a complicated task. The contemporary American Indian artist, on the other hand, was believed to exist in evolutionary and cultural stasis: He not only continued to make what was considered savage or barbarian art but also gave an observable example of the “primitive” artist at work. Vulnerable to nature’s vicissitudes, the American Indian artist relied on “spontaneous or instinctive impulses of his mind,” which left him incapable of purely intellectual or deliberate thought. With the mind thus constrained, the primitive artist

\textsuperscript{228} Powell, “Savagery to Barbarism,” 176.
\textsuperscript{230} Conn, \textit{History’s Shadow}, 22.
actualized his creative impulses “along the lines laid by his environment”—that is, he copied nature.  

Vroman’s approach to making negatives and prints suggests that, to borrow terms used in contemporary photographic circles, he was as savage as the primitive artists he photographed. His photographic practice reveals the extent to which the discourses of photography conceived of the medium as one frustratingly suspended between the primitive state of pure technique and the civilized status of fine art. Although for many decades Vroman has enjoyed a reputation as one of the most talented photographers of the turn-of-the-century American West, not much consideration has been given to his conflicting scientific and artistic ambitions, nor to his status as a self-taught amateur operating outside of the salon system. These factors must be considered alongside Vroman’s principal subject matter—the indigenous peoples and landscapes of the Southwest—in order to better understand his concerns as a photographer.

Attention to these overlooked aspects of Vroman’s practice also sheds new light on photographic discourses of the period, which adopted the language of social evolutionary theory. The uncertain artistic status of the medium has long been a subject of scholarship on early American photographers and their work. However, writing on the topic has mainly limited its scope of inquiry to the aesthetics of fine art, particularly as related to Western traditions of painting.  

Largely lacking is a consideration of alternative discourses, such as contemporary anthropological theory. As this chapter

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shows, anthropological ideas not only found their way into photographic literature; they also, in the case of Vroman, affected how photographers made and understood their work. By attending to Vroman’s production of negatives and his printing methods, namely his use of the platinum process, in the context of anthropology, we can better understand what was at stake for photography circa 1900. As I will demonstrate, aesthetic failure could relegate the medium to the level of the barbaric or—even worse—the savage stage of culture.

**Duplicating Negatives**

In the spring of 1898, ethnologist Frederick Webb Hodge devised a summer excursion unlike most undertaken by the Smithsonian’s Bureau of American Ethnology. He proposed to photograph—systematically and thoroughly—the Pueblo Indian villages located to the west of and along the lower Rio Grande River in New Mexico. His plan, realized in 1899, built upon and surpassed the efforts of photographer John K. Hillers, who between 1879 and 1882 had created hundreds of negatives in the New Mexico and Arizona Territories for the Bureau. Since its founding in 1879, the Bureau had maintained an intense scientific interest in the Southwest and, in expeditions to the region, had used photography as an accessory to textual description, drawing, and mapping. Although never an end in itself, photography had consistently figured in the agency’s endeavors to document regional archeological sites and Pueblo Indian villages, people, and (as much as photographic technology then allowed) rites and ceremonies. At the end of the century, Hillers’s photographs remained relevant to the work of the agency.

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and continued to appear in Smithsonian publications. Although Hillers’s achievement was considerable, it was also limited because of the technology, the wet-plate collodion process, he used. In contrast, Hodge’s photographer would use the modern technique of dry plate photography, which replaced the wet collodion process in the mid-1880s, and could thus work more quickly, efficiently, and nimbly than his predecessor. The villages, including smaller ones of only cursory interest to Hillers, and their environs were to be thoroughly documented in a matter of weeks.

Since Hodge’s trip was not a pressing institutional priority, he enlisted his considerable professional network in order to augment the expedition’s intellectual credentials and to keep Bureau expenditures low. Hodge was to be the only Smithsonian employee to participate in the expedition. He would of course draw his regular federal salary, but above that the institution budgeted a mere $400 for supplies, food, ancillary expenses, and temporary assistants and interpreters to be recruited as needed in the field.235 Deemed “volunteers” by the agency, George Parker Winship and Elliot Coues, respected historians of the colonial Spanish conquest of New Mexico, were evidently keen to take an unpaid summer journey along the Rio Grande River. Hodge also prevailed upon C. A. Higgins, head of tourism of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, “to place the facilities of the road at [the expedition’s] disposal.”236 The safe conveyance of photographic equipment to and from the field, especially hundreds of glass plate negatives, was Hodge’s primary concern. The illustrations that appear in the New Mexico chapters of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe’s 1903 guidebook, Indians


236 Frederick Webb Hodge to Adam Clark Vroman, April 6, 1898, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
of the Southwest, suggest that Hodge bartered the use of transportation resources in exchange for the railroad’s unrestricted use of the resulting photographs (Fig. 34).

Hodge made a similar deal with his prospective photographer. He wrote to Vroman on April 6, 1898, to persuade the bookstore owner to serve as field photographer. The previous summer, in 1897, Hodge had met Vroman at Laguna Pueblo in the New Mexico Territory. At the time, Hodge was engaged in a heated dispute over the former occupancy of the Enchanted Mesa near Acoma Pueblo (see chapter 2). Prior to leaving Washington, DC, Hodge had recognized the necessity of documenting visual evidence found atop the mesa and so had budgeted the purchase of a handheld Kodak camera. He must have been relieved to entrust the photographic work to the eager, better equipped, and camera-savvy Vroman. He was certainly gratified by Vroman’s results. Vroman proved himself to be talented, industrious, and willing to work without pay—no wonder Hodge considered him an ideal candidate for a photographic tour along the Rio Grande.

Hodge pitched the trip to Vroman as a “leisurely, pleasant, and profitable outing,” whose ultimate success required the photographer’s participation: “…I [am] especially desirous of getting you to go along with me if it could be arranged, as I thought a photographic tour of all the Rio Grande pueblos would prove eminently desirable and at least as fruitful as any similar trip that had ever been made.” In a subsequent letter to Vroman, he emphasized the urgency of the undertaking. In language consistent with the notion that American Indians were “vanishing,” he impressed upon the photographer that the “time may never come again for us to make such a complete set of Pueblo

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237 Ibid., n.p.
The ethnologist was concerned about the harmful impact of non-Natives on the traditional way of life of Pueblo Indians.

Hodge was so eager to secure Vroman’s services that he devised a way to offer at least some kind of compensation. Vroman would make “duplicates”—in fact, two exposures of each scene on separate plates—and keep one set for himself. Hodge explicitly laid out the plan in an April 6, 1899, letter to Vroman. The tour of the Rio Grande pueblos would cost Vroman nothing. In exchange, Vroman had only to agree “to take duplicates of all the pictures at our expense—that is, at the expense of the Bureau.” Hodge furthermore suggested that the Bureau would also cover the costs of any extra plates Vroman would retain “as a compensation for the photos (duplicates) which you make for us.” To summarize his vision of Vroman’s working method, Hodge restated: “In other words I am anxious to arrange…to get you to go on…[an] outing without any expense to yourself, you agreeing to make a lot of duplicate pictures for me.” Vroman was interested. Writing in 1899, on the eve of the trip, he noted that he had calculated the number of negatives necessary for his and Hodge’s purposes.

But how did Vroman execute his mandate for “duplicates,” which were meant to be the product not of the darkroom but of camera work? Hodge was not interested in true

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238 Frederick Webb Hodge to Adam Clark Vroman, April 28, 1898, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
239 Hodge’s field notes indicate his concern over a “Mexicanization” of the New Mexico Pueblo Indian villages. See Frederick Webb Hodge Diary, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
240 Frederick Webb Hodge to Adam Clark Vroman, April 6, 1898, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
241 Vroman’s calculations were as follows: “If you contemplate a complete set of Negatives of the 26 Pueblos it would average say 10 to each Pueblo. 260=21 dozen to say nothing of side things Cliff Dwellings etc & with what I would use for myself would nearly double the amount or say possibly 50 dozen Plates 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 & 15 dz 5 x 7 for figure studies.” Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, May 6, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
duplicates—that is, copy negatives made from interpositives. Rather, he used the term as shorthand for an in-camera maneuver that produced variant, not duplicate, negatives of a given scene. According to the scheme, Vroman was to load his view camera with a plate holder containing the maximum two negatives. For each scene, the photographer exposed both negatives in the holder, one after the other. Consecutive exposures in a view camera were not automatic; they involved the photographer’s intervention. The photographer would load the plate holder in the camera, expose the first negative, remove the plate holder from the camera, turn it, reload it, and expose the second negative.

The two negatives Vroman made of Santa Clara Pueblo from the southeast demonstrate the results of that process (Figs. 35 and 36). Figure 35 is reproduced from a legacy album print made from the negative Vroman retained, and figure 36 is a scan from the negative Vroman turned over to Hodge and the Bureau. Although the order is uncertain, it is clear that, from one exposure to the next, Vroman shifted his camera ever so slightly, either to the left or right. In the negative he retained, a woman appears with her back to the camera, as if striding toward the open door at the center of the image. But her presence in one image and absence in the other is hardly noticeable. The pause between exposures, during which Vroman’s camera shifted, also led to the inclusion (or exclusion, depending on the order) of the trees at the right of the image. The overall composition, however, underwent no fundamental change. With each two-negative set, the photographer produced nearly identical representations of Santa Clara and its surroundings. In terms of content, no one negative had an appreciable advantage over the

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242 To make a copy negative, photographers first made a negative of their original negative. Tonally reversed, the result was called an interpositive. This interpositive was then itself photographed (the tones again being reversed) to make the final copy negative.
other. Both offer a visual description of the most salient features of the village and its environs.

**Copying Nature**

Despite Vroman’s enthusiastic execution of Hodge’s mandate at Santa Clara, he was no doubt alert to the fact that Hodge’s emphasis on the production of negatives was at odds with an emerging theme in the photographic trade literature. This literature minimized the importance of the negative in the picture-making process. As neatly summarized in a 1900 issue of *The Photo-Miniature*, an increasing number of American and British critics sought to dispel the notion that “negative-making [was] the chief aim and purpose in photography.” The negative was an undeniable necessity but nonetheless a mere “means to an end,” the “real end intended in all photography [being] the print.” This new criticism rejected the conviction, propagated “almost wholly” by misguided amateurs, that a good negative guaranteed success with any kind of printing process. The astute cameraman understood that printing processes differed from one to the next, offering scales of tones that ranged from light to dark. Before exposing the negative, the “intelligent” photographer had already identified the specific printing process—with its attendant characteristic tonality—that would best aid his interpretation of the scene. Anticipating Ansel Adams by a few decades, the turn-of-the-century photographer therefore exposed his negative according to the demands of the pre-visualized print. In this way, the good negative was redefined not as “admirable for the perfection of its
technical qualities” but as a means of making “good prints by the printing process pre-
determined as best suited to the interpretation of the subject.”

By minimizing the role of the negative, turn-of-the-century critics wished to make
a clear break with antiquated approaches to photography and to distance the modern
practitioner from the more blatantly mechanical aspects of the medium. They believed
the “cult of the ‘perfect negative’” came into being around 1852, when the first wet-plate
photographers endeavored to “[discover] and [utilize] the technical range and limits of
their craft.” Amateurs and professionals were then united in a single-minded effort to
realize the scientific “marvels” represented by the techniques of photography, and so
were “content to reproduce” what appeared before the camera. The early photographer
was “a willing slave” to the application of chemical and optical laws and located his
success in the production of a perfect negative—“clear, clean, brilliant, sharp, graduated,
in perfect steps from black to white.” Triumph was seen as the ability to make a print
that equaled the vigor of negative. A “good print” was not one that represented the
photographer’s interpretation of a scene but one that communicated the outstanding
characteristics of the negative. The print served to demonstrate the technical aptitude of
the practitioner in the production of the negative. The ideal negative, in turn,
reproduced with uncompromising fidelity the “form and values of the original” before the
camera.

244 “Camera Work,” Camera Craft 6, no. 4 (Feb. 1903): 166.
(Oct. 1895): 245.
246 Ibid., 245.
247 “Camera Work,” 166.
Early amateurs and professionals had pursued the technically perfect negative to develop their craft as a science; yet later critics maintained that those efforts had hampered the development of the medium as an avenue for individual expression. As an instrument or handmaiden of science, photography had functioned to “hold the mirror up to nature,” to represent the object before the camera with mechanical precision. To that end, the perfect negative had been hailed as a “product of pure light,” or “the deposit of pure silver in fine gelatin the gradations of which should perfectly reproduce the form and values of the original.” The form of the original impressed itself on the negative according to the predictable and repeatable laws of chemistry and physics. Unsullied by the tricks of the darkroom, the so-called perfect negative was free from intervention by the “hand of man.” Photography thus satisfied the mandate of science to apprehend “pre-existing truth”—a process of comprehension rather than creation. The initial emphasis on technique had worked to establish photography as an invaluable scientific tool. But technical perfection had come to “unconsciously [pervade] the photographic world.” To many ambitious turn-of-the-century amateurs, the technically perfect negative continued to represent the benchmark of excellence.248

Critics circa 1900 thus maintained that the practice of photography had stagnated for decades, thanks to the amateur and his insistence on the “perfection of processes and mechanical appliances.” Yet the same thinkers noted that a new kind of photographer had begun to emerge, one who promised to shed the field’s current lethargy and to set photography once again on a path of progress and innovation. In contrast to the amateur, the new art photographer strove for an “ideal of a better class of work,” and did not focus

248 Ibid., 166.
on minor questions of equipment and technical methods. His ambitions were above all to liberate himself from technique in order to bend the medium to his creative will. In his hands, photography lent itself to the resolution of aesthetic problems. Such resolution took the form of a work of art that bore the “impress of the individuality of the man behind the camera” rather than the “impress of the lens.”

Advocates of this view of photography did not necessarily agree on what, exactly, constituted an art photograph. Was it a photograph that emulated painting? Or, in anticipation of the “straight” aesthetic of modernism that emerged in the early twentieth century, one that embraced “scientific accuracy of detail” as signs of “high artistic qualities”? These critics agreed, however, that the field was divided in two camps: the professional versus the amateur. As one contributor to *The American Amateur Photographer* wrote in 1891:

> There are now, and always will be, two kinds of photographers: Those who make copies of Nature, and those who make pictures from Nature. The productions of one give an excellent idea of the characteristics of a locality, and are pictorially descriptive thereof. The pictures of the other suggest the feeling, the poetry, and the subtle beauties of creation.…

With his paramount emphasis on technique, the amateur was nothing more than a copyist, an imitator of nature—or, as anthropologists of the period would put it, a savage.

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250 Ibid., 134.

251 “Camera Work,” 168.

Savage Amateurs

In the use of such concepts as “stagnation,” “progress,” “development,” and “evolution,” words peppered throughout the criticism quoted above, photography’s new defenders adopted the rhetoric of contemporary social evolutionary theory. As already noted, in the United States the Smithsonian Institution had established the American school of anthropology—or the “new ethnology”—on this theory. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the theory gained traction outside of scientific circles. Most significantly, its principles informed and affirmed the expansionist and assimilationist policies of the federal government. As the ideas gained popular appeal, they infiltrated contemporary discourses of photography. The theoretical model of social evolution applied equally to anthropological studies of artistic production.

Powell’s article “Savagery to Barbarism” is an important document of this line of thought. As Powell explains, art in its early stages began with the savage recognizing “the hand [as] more than a paw,” the culmination of which was the civilized expression of an aesthetic sensibility: Western fine art. The person occupying a civilized state of culture had fully “adapted the environment to himself—that is, he...created for himself an artificial environment by means of his art.” A distinguishing characteristic of those occupying a primitive mental stage of culture, particularly savages, was an incomplete mastery of nature or a failure to subjugate nature. Primitives, those living in the “lower civilisations” of savagery and barbarism, were vulnerable to nature’s vicissitudes, and

253 See chapter 5 of Hinsley, The Smithsonian and the American Indian.
254 Dilworth, Imagining Indians in the Southwest, 24.
255 In Art and the Higher Life: Painting and Evolutionary Thought in Late-Nineteenth-Century America (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), Kathleen Pyne examines how evolutionary discourses shaped the didactic aims of artists in the United States. Anthropological discourses on the social evolution of art and their impact on photography fall outside the scope of her study.
256 Powell, “Savagery to Barbarism,” 176.
257 Ibid., 193.
their creative capacities, as Otis Tufton Mason put it, “simply follow[ed] the leading string and the mandates of Nature.”\textsuperscript{258}

Mason, a curator at the Smithsonian’s National Museum, elaborated that the mental capacity of the savage was especially limited by Nature’s example: “…[he] does not invent, he simply borrows his clothing from the animals, his house from the trees and caverns, his food from many sources. He is an out-and-out imitator.”\textsuperscript{259} In terms of artistic production, with the mind thus constrained, the savage artist naturally also depended on “Nature herself [to give] expression to a formal thought” and repeated the forms suggested by nature to the best of his ability. “[A]fter all she [the savage artist] was a novice, and her imitations display her limits. The composition and resolutions of her desires, the patterns before her, the limitations of her material and the effects of environment, account for all [artistic] forms.”\textsuperscript{260} In other words, at the level of savagery, forms and techniques suggested by environmental factors dictated the path and outcome of art. As an absolute imitator of nature, the savage was incapable of aesthetic expression.

Similar judgments were made of the amateur photographer. Like the savage artist, the amateur operated within the confines suggested or impressed upon him by his environment. His creative capacity—his imagination—was limited by the materials and techniques available to him. A craftsman more than an artist, the amateur photographer used his camera to record rather than interpret the world. Indeed, the savage-amateur copied specific elements in nature, making photographs that gave “an excellent idea of the characteristics of a locality.”\textsuperscript{261}

\textsuperscript{258} Mason, \textit{Origins of Invention}, 19.  
\textsuperscript{259} Ibid., 19.  
\textsuperscript{260} Ibid., 165.  
\textsuperscript{261} Treat, “Impressionism in Photography,” 7.
The entire premise of Hodge’s photographic expedition hinged on Vroman’s ability to make negatives that clearly delineated and described the characteristics of a locality. Vroman’s mandate was, after all, to produce negatives that would provide accurate visual descriptions of the Rio Grande Pueblo Indian villages. But did Vroman understand the implications of his assignment—namely, its relegation of photography to a savage state? Did he, as an amateur, recognize himself as a primitive photographer? Did he understand that Hodge’s emphasis on the production of a negative left his photographic practice languishing in a primitive or savage stage of development?

Vroman’s ambitions for his photography and his status as a prominent Pasadena photography retailer suggest that, at the very least, he read the country’s leading photographic periodicals and was thus aware of their chief concerns. Given the widespread influence of social evolutionary theory in those publications, Vroman would certainly have encountered it in his reading. And because he was a student of Smithsonian ethnology, he would have recognized—more so than his fellow cameramen—that the photographic literature had adopted the language of anthropology. Starting in 1897, Vroman began to assemble an extensive library focused on “anything pertaining to the Southwest, Pueblos especially.” In his efforts to acquire a complete run of National Museum and Bureau of American Ethnology publications, he traded his photographs to the Smithsonian. Additionally, he was personally acquainted with or had corresponded with leading proponents of social evolutionary theory at the Smithsonian, including Mason, William H. Holmes, Jesse Walter Fewkes, and Walter Hough. As the examples of the Snake Dance photographs (see chapter 1) and of Hodge’s 1899

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262 Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, April 19, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
photographic expedition demonstrate, Vroman also attempted to make photographs relevant to their work. It is therefore likely that Vroman recognized the grave implications of applying the logic of social evolutionary theory to the practice of photography: the amateur photographer, as Vroman himself was, becomes a mere “imitator of nature” who impedes the medium’s evolutionary progress from a primitive craft to a civilized fine art.

In fact, Vroman seems to have been alert to the outmoded conventionality of Hodge’s scheme. His negatives reveal that he was at times resistant to rigorous “duplication.” On the whole, the negatives Vroman made during the 1899 season demonstrate the diligence with which he undertook the task. As Hodge had envisioned, Vroman consistently exposed two or more negatives of each village or landscape and of each person who sat before the camera. He turned over hundreds of negatives to the Bureau that served (and still do) as visual documentation of the Rio Grande pueblos at the turn of the century. However, Vroman’s methods of duplication were not as straightforward and mechanistic as Hodge might have imagined. Rather than slavishly duplicate each scene, the photographer just as often altered the composition, however subtly, between exposures. Using dry-plate technology, Vroman had to develop the negatives in his Pasadena darkroom before he would know the results with any certainty. Evidently, the opportunity to expose two negatives for every scene sometimes emboldened Vroman to make radical compositional adjustments. On occasion, he even exposed a third or fourth negative of a given scene. Vroman also made final editorial decisions in the selection of negatives he retained. Likewise, when he found all the images of a particular scene or sitter unsatisfactory, he did not retain his “duplicate.”
In Taos Pueblo, for example, Vroman photographed the southern part of the village from the southwest at least three times (Figs. 37–39). The three extant images are all different, and the one he kept for himself has formal qualities that distinguish it from the two he gave to Hodge. The two Bureau images (Figs. 38 and 39) lack any compelling formal arrangement; the garden, adobe village, and mountain fail to coalesce into a satisfying compositional whole. They succeed, however, in suggesting the severity of the environment, and they point to Vroman’s interest in technical experimentation.

Evidently, between the two exposures, he swapped out lenses without moving the camera, thereby producing wider and narrower versions of the scene. Ultimately, even if visually awkward, these two images serve their scientific purpose: They describe a place. The image he kept for himself, on the other hand, shows real compositional integrity (Fig. 37). The angle of view is different, and the camera occupies a position clearly other than that of the exposures he gave away. The adobe structure is centered and superimposed on the mountain; its overall shape mimics and is bounded by the mountain’s silhouette. In the foreground, the garden now works in concert with the wall, forming converging lines that move the eye from left to right across the picture. The inclusion of a patch of light-toned ground in the lower right corner, which contrasts with the darker garden, establishes a rhythm of light and dark that works its way throughout the image. Doubtless Vroman kept this exposure because it is the most formally advanced and the most visually satisfying.

These three images of Taos demonstrate Vroman’s concern for compositional experimentation. But even with the latitude afforded by exposing at least two negatives for every scene, he was often just as satisfied with “duplication.” Photographs taken at
San Felipe Pueblo, for instance, show both discerning experimentation and disinterested duplication. Vroman was delighted by San Felipe’s picturesque position on the banks of the Rio Grande River and took advantage of a nearby mesa to make views of this pleasing aspect. He exposed a total of four negatives from a cliff overlooking the village and the river. In two of the images, the curve of the river seems to have been of primary concern, but, of those, it is only in the image he retained that he framed the scene to emphasize the shape of the river, using it to make a compelling formal statement (Figs. 40 and 41). In that view, figure 40, the left-hand bank of the river aligns perfectly with the lower left-hand corner of the image, and the S-curve formed by the river leads the eye easily through the composition. Here the village itself seems to be of little importance, hardly registering its presence in the scene. The negative he turned over to the Smithsonian, on the other hand, offers a more complete visual description of the village (Fig. 41). That view emphasizes the village’s topography, encircled as it is by both desert and vegetation. The village’s few adobe houses stand in the semicircle formed by the river. The course of the river, whose truncated S-curve begins at the bottom center the image, competes with the space the photographer allowed for the village.

While the “S-curve” San Felipe photographs show compositional experimentation, the other two exposures made on the mesa are identical; Vroman seems to have exposed these negatives in quick succession (Figs. 42 and 43). The mesa was the site of San Felipe’s long-since-abandoned old village. The position of the outcropping at the edge of the frame is reminiscent of compositional maneuvers used by stereographic photographers. As a stereoview, the outcropping would emphasize the three-dimensionality of the scene and, at the same time, give the viewer a sense of occupying
that ancient dwelling place. As a two-dimensional photograph, however, the outcropping is disruptive, obstructing the path of the river and interrupting the viewer’s immersion in the image.\textsuperscript{263} As figures 40 through 43 demonstrate, Vroman vacillated between informed compositional experimentation and the “duplication” of views that would have benefited from compositional adjustment.

Vroman’s modes of negative-making during the 1899 Rio Grande expedition reflect the general tensions and ambiguities in his approach to photography. Moreover, his digression from the directive to produce “duplicate” negatives suggests that he recognized that scientific labors could be an impediment to his development as a photographer, insofar as they required him to use the camera as a tool to copy nature.

In the months immediately after Hodge’s photographic tour, Vroman continued to equivocate, both embracing and resisting the scientific function of his photographs. Indeed, as he developed the negatives in his Pasadena darkroom over the course of six weeks, Vroman wrote at least fourteen letters to Hodge in which he attempted to manage the ethnologist’s reception of his work. In a note dashed off on September 5, he apprised Hodge of the initial results: “Developed Half 4x5 Film \textbf{All Good}… [A]round Acoma all good[,] some beauties in way of clouds…. 2 or 3 of Mud Heads [at Zuni] will make prints…. If balance come[s] out as well as all I have developed it will be good enough for anyone.”\textsuperscript{264} Vroman considered a success a negative from which he could produce what he deemed a good print. He sent along several proofs—printed in platinum—to serve as a testament to the results. “The random proofs are O.K.,” was Hodge’s reply, to which he

\textsuperscript{263} Vroman must have been satisfied with this view, as he retained one of the two negatives and included a platinum print of it in his personal albums. See Vroman album eight at the Pasadena Public Library, Pasadena, CA.

\textsuperscript{264} Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, September 5, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
added, “Some will reproduce well, and even the faintest ones are valuable as a basis for drawings whenever we want to make pictures for illustration.”

Hodge’s dispassionate reception was perhaps not what Vroman might have expected. The ethnologist was apathetic not only about the photographic print but also, in his reference to line drawings, about the photographic image itself. Nevertheless, in the following weeks Vroman tirelessly (and tiresomely) updated Hodge on the development of the negatives, judged as “fine,” “good,” “fair,” or “poor,” depending on Vroman’s speculative assessment of resulting prints and on his plans to intensify or retouch certain negatives to improve overall print quality. In fact, Vroman’s emphasis on the print, which his photographic colleagues valued over and above the negative, delayed the shipment of the “duplicate” negatives to Hodge by many months.

After October 1899, when Vroman temporarily set aside his duties to science in order to attend to holiday commerce for his bookstore, he refused to entrust work on the Rio Grande negatives to anyone else, including his teacher and local professional studio photographer C. J. Crandall. After Vroman returned to the task in the new year, in a letter to Hodge he claimed to be “thoroughly ashamed of [the negatives] as a whole” and urged Hodge not to reveal him as their maker. Disavowals aside, Vroman was apparently not completely embarrassed. In the same letter, he enclosed a list of select Rio Grand tour photographs he had recently deposited at the Library of Congress for copyright, noting that the Smithsonian would need his “authority to [re]produce” them. Vroman must have identified in the copyrighted photographs a marked superiority to the “duplicate” images.

265 Frederick Webb Hodge to Adam Clark Vroman, September 15, 1899, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
266 A few of Vroman’s 1899 negatives were put to immediate scientific use. See Edgar L. Hewett, “Archeology of Pajarito Park, New Mexico,” American Anthropologist 6, no. 5 (Oct.–Dec. 1904): plate xxv.
he would eventually turn over to Hodge. The photographer possibly assumed the Smithsonian would prefer to publish the copyrighted images instead of the ones they owned. He also updated Hodge on the number of photographs—more than three hundred—that he had printed and distributed to various parties who had assisted the 1899 summer expedition.\textsuperscript{267} These he printed in platinum from the negatives he eventually decided to retain. His choice of platinum is significant. It suggests an ambition on the part of the amateur to progress in his photographic practice—to evolve beyond the savage stage of copying nature.

The Platinum Print: Nature Interpreted

Photographs that Vroman made during the 1901 “Museum-Gates Expedition” (named after the Smithsonian National Museum and lumber baron Peter Goddard Gates) call attention to the importance of the platinum print in the photographer’s understanding of his own work. Vroman and Peter Goddard Gates met in the fall of 1900 because of a shared interest in photography. Not a photographer himself, Gates expressed particular admiration for Vroman’s cloud effects, which were achieved without darkroom trickery and therefore demonstrative of the photographer’s remarkable technical abilities (see chapter 4).\textsuperscript{268} Gates engaged Vroman to provide him with a photographic education. He left the chore of acquiring equipment to Vroman and planned two hands-on lessons in the

\textsuperscript{267} Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, September 5, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.

\textsuperscript{268} Peter Goddard Gates to Adam Clark Vroman, December 14, 1900, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
field: a spring outing to the Yosemite Valley and a summer “camping trip” to the Southwest, the latter of which ultimately became the Museum-Gates Expedition.\textsuperscript{269}

Gates did not intend his new hobby as a leisurely retirement pursuit. Rather, he saw photography as a means of documenting his primary ambition, the excavation of American Indian artifacts. During the planned summer trip, Gates wished to excavate Pueblo Indian archaeological sites on the Hopi Reservation in northeastern Arizona. Frustrated by an unyielding bureaucracy that discouraged private looting—or, as he scoffed, “stick[ing] a pick or shovel in the precious dirt”—Gates enlisted his new friend to write character references for him.\textsuperscript{270} With Vroman’s strong ties to the Smithsonian, the references were, as Gates wrote, “an open sesame.”\textsuperscript{271} Thanks to Vroman, Gates was able to arrange with the Smithsonian National Museum to receive half of the antiquities exhumed. The 1901 Museum-Gates Expedition was set in motion. As Gates remarked to Vroman, the museum was to “furnish the brains and have the find,” and he was to “pay the bills and hold the bag.”\textsuperscript{272}

Gates brokered a similar transaction with Vroman, one reminiscent of Hodge’s “duplicates” scheme of 1899. For the expedition, Gates ended up leaving the operation of the camera entirely to Vroman. He arranged to receive approximately half the negatives that Vroman exposed. As in 1899, during the 1901 expedition Vroman again loaded his view camera with a plate holder containing the maximum two negatives. For each scene he photographed—excavation sites, Arizona landscapes, Navajo encampments, Hopi

\textsuperscript{269} Peter Goddard Gates to Adam Clark Vroman, February 25, 1901, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
\textsuperscript{270} Ibid., n.p.
\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., n.p.
\textsuperscript{272} Peter Goddard Gates to Adam Clark Vroman, February 19, 1901, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
ceremonies, and portraits of Navajo and Hopi individuals—the photographer exposed both negatives in the holder, one after the other, producing several hundred pairs in total. Vroman later gave Gates one exposure from each pair.273

Yet the photographer did not forfeit everything. Among the photographs made during the Museum-Gates Expedition is a series of five of the acclaimed Hopi-Tewa potter Nampeyo at work in the process of creation—mixing, coiling and shaping her clay, painting and firing her pottery (Figs. 44–48). Credited for revitalizing the art of Pueblo pottery, Nampeyo (ca. 1856–1942) was, and remains, among the most celebrated Native artists of her time.274 With the Nampeyo images, Vroman chose not to make a complete set of variant negatives. Momentarily setting aside his copyist duties, Vroman appears to have withheld from his sponsor three of the five scenes.275 Since 1876, Nampeyo had been the subject of portrait photography, but never before had a photographer made a series dedicated to her working process. Vroman was the first.

Vroman circulated the Nampeyo photographs as both silver and platinum prints. That is significant because his choice of printing processes for a series that deals with an artist’s working process reflects larger issues under debate in contemporary photographic literature. His platinum prints in particular reveal hitherto unrecognized links between photographic and anthropological discourses. As demonstrated above, photography critics of the time borrowed anthropological concepts of the savage, the barbarian, and

273 Gates would later claim authorship of the negatives. See, for example, the two images made in a Navajo Indian encampment that Gates reproduced as his own in National Geographic Magazine (Feb. 1911): 212–213.
274 On the importance of Nampeyo to Native pottery see Barbara Kramer, Nampeyo and Her Pottery (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996) and Mary Ellen Blair and Laurence Blair, The Legacy of a Master Potter: Nampeyo and Her Descendants (Tucson, AZ: Treasure Chest Books, 1999).
275 Gates’s 1901 Museum-Gates expedition negatives are now housed at the Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA. The contents of this collection suggest that Vroman gave Gates variants of only two Nampeyo images: one of her coiling and the other of her painting.
the civilized to trace the medium’s previous evolution. They also used the same anthropological language to forecast the medium’s rise to the status of art. Vroman’s platinum prints suggest that he was aware of photography’s contested status in its evolution from a primitive craft to a civilized art. Especially in the Nampeyo series, but also in his platinum prints in general, Vroman appears to have found ways to comment on or attempt to circumvent the lowly evolutionary status of his photography.

The platinum process features prominently in the trade literature that predicted photography’s evolutionary development from a savage to a civilized art. The invention of the process was announced in the lead article of the January 30, 1874, issue of The British Journal of Photography. British inventor William Willis (1841–1923) applied to photographic prints his observation that, explained the Journal, a “solution of ferrous oxalate in potassic oxalate reduced salts of platinum to the metallic state.” Determined to produce images from the “the most stable substance he could think of,” he had initiated experiments with the nobler element to replace the ubiquitous silver in photographic prints, silver being unstable and prone to fading and yellowing. With Willis’s process, the platinum was embedded directly in the fibers of the supporting paper; silver, in contrast, was merely suspended in an intervening albumen layer. Whereas silver paper yielded crisp results, platinum produced a soft, matte photographic image. The permanence of a photograph made by the platinum process was, according to the Journal, “undoubted,” and the platinum print also boasted a “most delicate gradation [of tone] with much vigour” and a “strong and intense black.”

Anticipating the importance of his discovery, Willis had patented the process in 1873, and in 1879 his Platinotype Company

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began the commercial manufacture of platinum paper. In his seminal apology for art
photography, *Naturalistic Photography for Students of the Art* (1889), British
photographer Peter Henry Emerson unequivocally endorsed the platinotype, maintaining
that the process had raised photography’s standard. Indeed, prior to Willis’s discovery, no
“artist could rest content to practice photography alone as an art, so long as such inartistic
printing methods as the pre-platinotype processes had been in vogue.” By the end of
the century, the platinum process was principally associated with art-photographic
practice.

Vroman printed in platinum as soon as he became serious about photography. In
the fall of 1894, he settled permanently in Pasadena and opened the bookstore, which
would soon expand into a photography supply shop. By early 1895, the novice had spent
the sizeable sum of three hundred dollars on a large-format view camera, plate holders, a
tripod, shutters, lenses, flanges, and negatives. He also acquired printing frames,
developing trays, all manner of chemicals, and graduated cylinders, and he continued to
add key pieces of equipment. In the spring of 1895, he completed the construction of his
private darkroom and was ready to print from negatives he had made around town. To
that end, Vroman ordered a gross of gelatino-chloride paper and several dozen sheets of
platinotype paper. After his first trip to the Southwest, in August 1895, he organized
the first of his photography exhibitions in Pasadena. Presumably, given the importance of
the process to the field, he included platinum prints in that display.

Vroman’s use of platinum, even as a beginner, represents a shift in turn-of-the-
century approaches to the process. At the time, critics noted the transformation of the

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279 See the inventory of Vroman’s first darkroom in Webb and Weinstein, *Dwellers at the Source*, 205–206.
once-difficult process into simplicity itself, and they increasingly encouraged novices to apply themselves to platinotypy. For example, in 1897 Englishman A. Horsley Hinton published a manual on platinotype printing intended for the beginner. He was a regular contributor to American photography journals and his book enjoyed a broad reception, including in the United States. To make the process more widely comprehensible, Hinton wished to dispense with what were perceived as its daunting complexities. In his words, he provided a “very gentle helping hand,” guiding the beginner through the entire process, from the most effective method of opening a tube of platinum paper to the final intensification of the print.\footnote{A. Horsley Hinton, \textit{Platinotype Printing: A Simple Book on the Process}, The Amateur Photographer’s Library, no. 11 (London: Hazell, Watson & Viney, 1897), 7.} With clear language, helpful diagrams, and few dizzying formulas, Hinton demonstrated the ease and rapidity of the process. As a further incentive to adopt platinotypy he cited “immunity from unequal toning, blisters, unaccountable stains and discoloration, subsequent fading, and a host of other errors and difficulties” that plagued silver printers.\footnote{Ibid., 11.} Discarding the conventional approach that prescribed learning silver before platinum, Hinton urged those educated in “[only] the most elementary steps of photographic practice…to take to platinotype….”\footnote{Ibid., 12.}

Although Hinton framed his argument in practical terms, his advocacy of platinum over silver printing helped to emancipate photography from a process that was not only materially inferior but also intellectually and aesthetically deficient. Significantly, Hinton deployed the rhetoric of anthropology—savagery, barbarism, civilization—thereby framing photography explicitly in social evolutionary terms. “To the savage,” he declared, “[the] brilliant and gaudy colours and glittering tinsel [of the
silver print] appeal to [a] barbarian taste; [while] the beauty of delicate tone and blended hues [of the platinotype] is only known to the highly-civilised and cultured.”

Vroman’s early embrace of platinum, made possible by popularizing efforts such as Hinton’s, suggests an interest in producing works of art. At the same time, however, his decision to photograph Native artists at their work indicates a desire to be relevant to science. Ethnologist Jesse Walter Fewkes’s prolonged indifference to Vroman’s Snake Dance photographs (see chapter 1) ultimately influenced the amateur cameraman to augment his subject matter in an attempt to make it more scientifically pertinent.

An even more important shift in Vroman’s subject matter was prompted by the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum curator Otis T. Mason. In the fall of 1898, Vroman sent prints from his summer negatives not only to Fewkes but also to Mason. Until then, Vroman had shown no interest in photographing Native artists at their work. In a letter to Vroman, Mason dismissed Vroman’s Pueblo Indian ceremonial and village views as unexceptional, assuming that any respectable camera-toting tourist to the Southwest would photograph those subjects. He instead encouraged Vroman to photograph the “unworked field” of what he called the Artes Indianorum. An ardent proponent of Smithsonian social evolutionary theory, Mason had dedicated himself to tracing the development of “savage” art, such as pottery, to a highly evolved or “civilized” art, such as porcelain. He looked to the contemporary arts of the savage—that is, of the Native North American—to locate the origins of contemporary civilized

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283 Ibid., 10.
284 In 1897, Vroman made an exposure of a Navajo woman sitting in front of her loom but not in the act of weaving, and in 1898 an Oraibi potter holding an unfinished pot.
285 Otis T. Mason to Adam Clark Vroman, October 15, 1898, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
artistic practices. To further entice Vroman to photograph the predominant themes of his own scholarship, Mason added the grandiose flourish, “Take up this and do it well and I will make you famous.”

During 1899 photographic expedition to the Rio Grande Pueblos, Vroman deviated somewhat from the duties prescribed by Hodge; for the first time, he sought out and photographed Southwest indigenous artists at their work. Correspondence reveals that he sent examples of these photographs to Mason and possibly also to William H. Holmes, an art historian at the Smithsonian Bureau of American Ethnology. In Zuni, Vroman made four negatives of two lapidaries. With each pair again exposed one after the other, one set of negatives depicts the subject using a bow drill to make beads and the other pair shows a second man seated at his bench (Fig. 49). Vroman also made two negatives of a woman seated before her loom, pausing at her task to pose for the photographer. The following summer (1900), Vroman continued to photograph artists at their work. In Oraibi at Hopi, he photographed a basket weaver, and at Acoma he made his first photographs of “Mary,” an important Acoma potter whom he photographed again in 1902 and 1904. As the photographs of Navajo silversmith Ha-kah-e-to-he illustrate (Fig. 29), Vroman also turned his attention to the documentation of production processes. In addition to the silversmith, he photographed (with both a view and handheld camera) a series illustrating in “A Hopi Moccasin Maker at Work” (Fig. 50) and a “Hopi Hair Dresser at Work” (Fig. 51).

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287 Otis T. Mason to Adam Clark Vroman, October 15, 1898, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
288 Starting in 1898, Vroman was in regular contact with Holmes regarding Bureau reports. Given Holmes’s stalwart reputation, it is likely Vroman sent prints to the art historian. Regardless, Vroman was certainly familiar with Holmes’s scholarship. For examples of their correspondence see Letterbooks 42, 49, and 50 Bureau of American Ethnology Records, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC and correspondence in Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
This shift in approach, with its increasing immersion in the actions and procedures depicted, mirrors the changes that Vroman made in photographing the Snake Dance. Starting in 1895, he photographed the ceremony in series over the course of its observance; later, he moved increasingly closer to the action of the dance (see chapter 1). The same principle applies to his depictions of artists and craftsmen.

The photographs of the potter Nampeyo belong to the same shift in Vroman’s approach, and indeed they were made during the same 1901 expedition (Museum-Gates) that produced the photographs of the silversmith, the moccasin maker, and the hairdresser. By that time, ethnologists had for many years considered Nampeyo the most talented of Native potters and attributed to her a revival in Pueblo Indian pottery. But contemporary assessments also reveal reservations about the quality of her work, something of which Vroman must have been aware. Smithsonian curator Walter Hough led the Museum-Gates expedition and was also its intellectual authority. As he made his summer excavations of Puebloan archaeological sites, Hough appears to have thought carefully about Nampeyo’s work and its relation to that of her predecessors. In his final report, he commended Nampeyo for reviving an “old art,” but ultimately noted that the deficiencies of her work served only “to heighten our appreciation of the discrimination of the ancient potters….”

Hough’s assessment of Nampeyo’s pottery was hardly new. His judgment reflects that of his mentor, Fewkes. Fewkes was considered the preeminent scholar of Hopi customs. Several years earlier, Hough had assisted Fewkes in the excavation of several other Puebloan sites. In 1898, Fewkes had concluded that, while Nampeyo was “the most

expert modern potter,” her work imitated the ancient pottery that Fewkes had excavated (and brought to her attention).\footnote{Jesse Walter Fewkes, “Archaeological Expedition to Arizona in 1895,” in \textit{Seventeenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, Part 2} (Washington, DC: GPO, 1898), 660.} The ancient ware, declared Fewkes, indicated a people who had developed out of savagery and into a high state of barbarism. Although Fewkes hesitated to declare Nampeyo’s pottery a degenerate art form, he considered it “greatly deteriorated” compared with the ancient examples.\footnote{Ibid., 651.} In his view, her work at best reflected a compromised iteration of the craft as practiced by her barbaric predecessors. At worst, it was the product of a savage mind.

Over the course of several years, Vroman printed his photographs of Nampeyo as both silver and platinotype prints. His annotations on the prints not only inform us about his approach to Nampeyo, they also suggest an increasing uncertainty over the status of his own body of work. After he had made negatives of the potter, he added simple notes about the subject matter to the negative sleeves; for example, one of the two surviving sleeves is inscribed, “Moki Towns. Nambaya [i.e., Nampeyo]. Burning Pottery.”\footnote{He made hundreds of negatives, but very few of the original negative sleeves still exist. The extant sleeves are now housed with the bulk of the remaining negatives at the Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, CA.} The annotations on the earliest prints, however, are somewhat different in character, consistent with the more public nature of prints as opposed to negatives. They either praise Nampeyo or frame her abilities in social evolutionary terms. On the verso of a silver print he gave to Charles F. Lummis, he wrote, “Nambaya, famous potter, moulding, Hano,”\footnote{See the verso of photograph P.5973, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.} and on the verso of a platinotype version of the print, “Nambaya, the best of the Pueblo Potters, Moulding.”\footnote{See the entry for photograph 165.383 from the typescript list prepared by Vroman for Marrs, Kingsmill Marrs Photographs, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.} But even while dispensing superlatives, Vroman...
adhered to anthropological convention. On the negative sleeve for the photograph of Nampeyo painting, Vroman noted “painting pottery,” thereby attributing to Nampeyo the ingenuity of a painter. Yet when he circulated prints, he remedied that mistake. On the verso of a print of a similar photograph at the Autry Museum, this one of Nampeyo’s daughter, Vroman made a correction that reveals a clear awareness of current anthropological thought: “Daughter of Nambaya painting decorating pottery.”

Although ethnologists did refer to ancient potters as “artists,” they stopped short of acknowledging them as painters. Rather, the potters were seen as merely decorators who applied primitive ornamentation to pottery that was, in the words of William H. Holmes, “not wholly an intellectual, but rather what I prefer to call an instinctive art.” As defined by Holmes, the instinctive artist “hardly [ranked] as more than a part of the environment,” his art “derived, unconsciously, from nature.” Holmes further asserted that “ideas of the beautiful, are, in primitive stages of art, all but impotent in the presence of technique,” or craft. Here it must be remembered that, according to Fewkes and Hough, Nampeyo’s pottery represented a “greatly deteriorated” form of an ancient art. That said, she and her predecessors—whether the lowest savage or the somewhat more evolved barbarian—were all primitives. The primitive artist did not intellectually interpret nature; instead, she instinctively copied it. In that process, technique, or craft, trumped aesthetics.

295 See Vroman number 1261 in the “The Vroman Collection of Negatives,” a typescript of transcriptions from Vroman’s original negative sleeves, most of which are now missing. Seaver Center for Western History Research, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, Los Angeles, CA.
296 See the verso of photograph P.5987, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
As a platinotype printer, Vroman failed to evolve in the fashion prescribed in photography’s trade literature. He refrained from intervening, with a paintbrush, on his final print. As noted above, Hinton had advised novice photographers “to take to platinotype…instead of first becoming proficient in silver printing.” In doing so, he sought not only to safeguard the novice from “savagery” but also to keep photography from regressing in its evolutionary trajectory. Although Hinton emphasized the ease of platinum printing, he nevertheless concluded his volume with an advanced lesson in platinotype modifications, in particular local development with the glycerin method. Reliant upon intervention with a paintbrush, the glycerin method was, he noted, “not mechanical and so depend[ed] for success very largely on a certain amount of artistry on the part of the user.”301 In so concluding, Hinton promoted the evolutionary progression of the novice, guiding him away from the mechanics of technique or craft and delivering him to the exalted sphere of civilized artistic practice.

This was part of a larger trend in contemporary thought both about the platinotype process and about the general practice of photography in the United States. In 1899, American journal *The Photo-Miniature* published an issue on platinotype processes and in 1902 a companion issue dedicated to platinotype modifications. In the latter, author Osborne I. Yellott asked why modifications were at all desirable when the journal had claimed in 1899 that platinotypes “‘offer us at once the simplest, most direct and most satisfactory means of producing from our negatives prints which are indisputably permanent and beautiful.’”302 Yellott had a ready answer. Modifications allowed “those

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possessing individuality…to modify the print based on the necessities of the subject” and to guard against churning out “mere records of fact in monotonous black and white.”

As the owner of a bookstore that was also the leading photography supplier in Pasadena, Vroman was aware of such arguments. Nevertheless, despite the frustration he expressed in 1901 that his photographs were seen as “amateurish,” he never printed with modifications. Seen through the lens of contemporary photography literature, Vroman foundered in the primitive stages of art production. Rather than an artistic interpretation, his practice was a craftsmanly effort to copy his environment.

In 1903, two of Vroman’s Nampeyo photographs appeared as halftone illustrations in the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway’s travel guide Indians of the Southwest. Nowhere in the volume is Vroman credited for his work. Moreover, his photographs of the famous potter are poorly described. In one, she is simply called “A Hopi Pottery Maker” (Fig. 52), and in the other, “Firing Potter, Acoma,” she is falsely relocated from the Hopi mesas to Acoma (Fig. 53, left). In neither is she identified by name. She is an anonymous potter in photographs by an anonymous maker.

The depersonalized, wrongly located “Firing Pottery, Acoma” shares an opening with a halftone after a photograph by Edward S. Curtis, which is captioned “Nampeyo, of Hano, Decorating Pottery” (Fig. 53, right). In contrast to the sparse information under Vroman’s images, the caption here goes on to name the image-maker and carries a 1900 copyright date. Curtis had photographed Nampeyo during his first visit to Hopi in 1899 and continued to make portraits of the artist on subsequent trips. In a 1906 portrait, which Curtis reproduced as a photogravure in the famous twenty-volume The North American

303 Ibid., 155.
304 Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, February 14, 1901, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
Indian, Nampeyo has cast aside the workaday clothes she had worn in 1899 for Curtis and in 1901 for Vroman in exchange for a traditional dress (Fig. 54). Surrounded by the implements of her craft, she intently applies paint to a small pot. Shamoon Zamir has recently interpreted this portrait as a kind of self-portrait. That reading is consistent with Zamir’s larger effort to counter scholarship that emphasizes the exploitative nature of Curtis’s photographic project. Zamir argues that the paint-stone, which Curtis noted in his caption, “invites us to infer an association between [it] and a painter’s palette, and so, by extension, between the art of the potter and Curtis’s art of photography.”305 An inferred association between modes of painting (or, as we have seen, painting and “decorating”) might speak to a shared affinity between the “art” of the potter and the photographer, but, as this chapter has demonstrated, the two were not on equal evolutionary footing with Western painting. That said, around 1900 Curtis’s approach to photography would have placed his art, evolutionarily speaking, far above Nampeyo’s (and Vroman’s). The sepia-toned photogravures in The North American Indian are remarkably—one must assume by design—similar in appearance to Curtis’s virtuosic gum-over-platinum prints. To make gum bichromate platinum prints requires the photographer to brush gum arabic washes over a platinum print, to re-unite the print with the negative, and to re-expose to light. Highly complex, demanding the direct intervention of the photographer on the print, the process yields finished prints of exceptional depth, luminosity, tonality, and detail. In contemporary terms, Curtis was no primitive. Arguably, Vroman’s primitive approach to photography makes his photographs of Nampeyo much stronger candidates for being interpreted as indirect self-portraits.

But would Vroman have recognized an “affinity” with Nampeyo? In a comparable case, Elizabeth Hutchinson has argued that pictorialist Gertrude Käsebier not only recognized but, to her benefit, exploited a feeling of primitive affinity with Lakota Indians. These were performers in *Buffalo Bill’s Wild West* show, who sat for portraits in Käsebier’s New York studio around 1898 (Fig. 55). In particular, based on a 1901 article about the studio visit likely written by Käsebier, Hutchinson contends that the Indian portraits “embody” a certain personal primitivism on the part of the photographer. In the 1901 article, Käsebier’s Lakota portraits appear alongside reproductions of drawings made by Native men during the portrait session. According to Hutchinson, the juxtaposition invites the reader “to find in the drawings and photographs individuality and strength that are missing in more refined cultural documents…. [T]hey are used to critique the direction that modern American ‘civilization’ has taken.” Hutchinson interprets Käsebier’s gesture in the article as an effort to connect her artistic production with “primitive creativity.” Indeed, she sees Käsebier’s intervention on “the surfaces of the prints—her elaborate printing processes, retouchings, spottings, and signatures—…as signs of her irrational, instinctive engagement with her art.” However, as this chapter has demonstrated with the example of Vroman and discussions in contemporary photographic literature, interventions such as these were not necessarily indicative of a “primitive” or primitivist photographer—monikers Hutchinson applies interchangeably to Käsebier. Instead, they could be understood to betray quite the opposite: a photographer fully engaged in the aesthetic evolution of art. Vroman had no need to exploit a *feeling* of

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307 Ibid., 135.
308 Ibid., 146.
primitive affinity. By contemporary standards, he was a primitive. If he recognized a formal or technical affinity with the potter, he eventually sought to distance himself from it. This is apparent in how he subsequently approached the Nampeyo portraits.

Vroman’s photographs of Nampeyo would most likely have been understood by his contemporaries as fully primitive, even savage. His direct, unmodified method of printing was suitable to the Native subject, and like Nampeyo’s pottery, Vroman’s platinum prints were copied from nature, wholly dependent on camera technique. But Vroman seems to have been uneasy with his status as a primitive. For later platinum prints, Vroman stopped identifying Nampeyo by name and instead described her simply as “The Potter.”309 By omitting Nampeyo’s name and calling her “The Potter,” Vroman wrested his work from the constraints of the ethnographic archive. The photographs are no longer documents of the creative process of the pictured individual. With the change in title to “The Potter,” Vroman situated the work within a traditional category of Western art: the genre scene. The subject matter becomes generalized and loses its originally intended specificity. The new title marks an attempt by Vroman to transform his photograph of Nampeyo into art and himself into an artist.

309 See the caption in the variant of Pasadena Public Library album twelve at Princeton University. Adam Clark Vroman, Arizona / Hopi Pueblos, 1901, Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ.
Chapter Four
Gathering the Clouds

On an August day in the summer of 1901, as he stood in the formidable expanse of the Arizona desert, Vroman was unsure how best to photograph the terrain, sky, and clouds. For several years, he had made the desert clouds the main subject matter of hundreds of negatives, but on that day, for some reason, he struggled to find the right exposure. On the spot, he exposed at least three 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 inch glass plate negatives with his view camera. Two of those negatives, now at the Autry Museum in Los Angeles, Vroman turned over to his friend Peter Goddard Gates (Figs. 56 and 57). A third negative appears to have been the one Vroman retained; it survives in the form of a few platinotypes that Vroman printed from it (Fig. 58). Because a plate holder for a view camera carried two negatives, it is likely that he photographed the Autry negatives first and in quick succession. From one exposure to the next, he moved the camera; the mesa at the lower left in the first exposure is missing in the second exposure, and there is a slight shift in the relative positions of the clouds. He also changed the exposure time. In the first negative, the velvety undulations in the indistinct foreground give way, in the second and longer-exposed negative, to more clearly defined patches of scrubby blackbrush and bunchgrass. Vroman must have realized that the longer exposure would overexpose the sky, resulting in the chemical obliteration of the clouds during development, the beginning of which can be seen in the lower right of figure 57. For the third picture, Vroman left his camera in place, loaded another plate holder, and shortened the exposure
time. This modification restored the clouds and again shrouded the foreground in darkness.

By the time he had loaded and exposed the third plate, the cloud topography that had burned onto the first two negatives had significantly shifted, literally floated away. Vroman had not marshaled his equipment quickly enough to capture the subject just as before. He expressed his disappointment in the caption of a print made from the third negative, now at the Princeton University Library. Written in Vroman’s distinctive hand, it reads “Moki Towns (A Sky That the Camera Could Not Get).” These words sum up his frustrated efforts on that August day. More significantly, they encapsulate his photographic vision of the Southwest, for with these words he united the Hopi Indians, the desert clouds, and the camera. With this statement, he explicitly connected his photographic practice and the Hopi Indians.

From the moment of Vroman’s rediscovery in the 1960s, scholars have consistently ascribed to him a proto-modernist or modernist sensibility, citing the cloud pictures as his foremost artistic achievement. For Beaumont Newhall, writing in 1961, Vroman’s cloudscape “presaged” modernists Paul Strand’s and Ansel Adams’s later work “under the same skies.”\(^\text{310}\) Other scholars have characterized Vroman’s cloud views as anticipatory of Equivalent, the series of cloud photographs Alfred Stieglitz created in the 1920s (Fig. 59).\(^\text{311}\) Inspired by the ideas of painter Wassily Kandinsky, Stieglitz conceived of his cloud series as a meditation on abstraction, equivalent to and revelatory

\(^{310}\) Newhall, “Adam Clark Vroman,” 16.
of the artist’s emotions; Stieglitz’s ambition was to call to mind music.312 He also understood his cloud photographs as a radical departure from tradition. In an article of 1923, he remarked that “‘Pictorial photographers’” recognized nothing of art in his direct approach to the photography of the sky; they were “totally blind to the cloud pictures”—“photographs that look like photographs.”313 For similar reasons, “Pictorial photographers” would also have been unimpressed with Vroman’s cloudscapes; however, to conceptualize Vroman’s cloud photographs as a benchmark leading to modernism is to overlook the particular contexts and the manner in which Vroman worked.

It is significant that Vroman did not direct his camera fully skyward, as Stieglitz would, but that he simultaneously photographed the landscape and the cloudscape on a single negative and made direct prints from that negative. At the turn of the twentieth century, as Stieglitz’s censure of Pictorialists suggests, the photography of clouds was central to debates over what made photographs fine art. In fact, the judicious placement of a cloud in a photograph had become a standard measure by which to judge the artistic merits of a print. For anyone wishing to make an art photograph, composite photography—the use of two or more negatives to make a single print—was the prescribed practice.

By contemporary standards, Vroman was no art photographer. Yet he persisted in his approach. He exposed hundreds of cloudscape negatives, and his platinum prints of them feature prominently in the Pasadena Public Library legacy albums. In the context of the albums, it becomes evident that his method of making cloud photography, which by

312 Stieglitz’s interest in music is a prominent theme in Katherine Hoffmann, Stieglitz: A Beginning Light (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004). Hoffmann also explores the photographer’s relationship with Kandinsky.
contemporary standards could be called his inartistic, arose from knowledge of the local significance of desert clouds. In his efforts to understand highly localized, non-Western customs, Vroman—in a way unprecedented among photographers—practiced a type of picture making that was informed by American Indian culture.

Clouds and the Painted Desert

As Vroman traversed the Painted Desert on his way to the Hopi Snake Dance in 1895, he complained of the “tiresome” landscape: “a barren waste [with] nothing to break the monotony except far beyond great Buttes sticking up…which our driver pointed out we would pass sometime the following afternoon.” Alongside the buttes, which rose “up from the flat country like sentinels [sic], placed there to see that man did not control the world,” he identified the sky as a relief from the monotony. The desert clouds, he noted, were “some of the most beautiful clouds I have ever seen…. [They change] every moment like a turbulent sea.” Those he photographed with the buttes, he stated enigmatically, “form some idea of what they are” (Fig. 6). As if erupting from the peaks of the volcanic cones, the cumulus clouds appear to rise and drift into the background; they seem poised to guide Vroman across the desert to First Mesa.

In 1895, Vroman christened his first venture into the photography of clouds “On the Way to Moqui Snake Dance: An Arizona Sky.” Although the caption suggests an intention to make a cloudscape, the composition and exposure time demonstrate that

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315 Adam Clark Vroman, verso of photograph five from “Trip to Arizona, 1895,” Horatio N. Rust Photograph Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
316 This caption is noted on the recto of the print Vroman gave to Rust immediately after the 1895 trip. See Adam Clark Vroman, recto of photograph five from “Trip to Arizona, 1895,” Horatio N. Rust Photograph Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA. In legacy album six at the Pasadena Public Library, the caption reads “On the Way to Moki Towns. (Twin Buttes).”
Vroman had initially conceived of the photograph as a landscape view. In fact, nearly blank skies with barely discernible, overexposed clouds feature consistently in his 1895 photographs, which suggests that he was then usually timing exposures for the landscape. The buttes in “An Arizona Sky” occupy the center of the composition; the terrain fills nearly half of the picture plane. The clarity of detail in the land features, coupled with the lack of detail in the clouds, indicates the photographer’s decision to allow for the longer exposure time required for a landscape photograph. His disappointment with the quality of the 1895 Snake Dance photographs (see chapter 1) was surely mitigated by this unexpected, if less than triumphant, initial success in capturing a similarly elusive subject matter. The desert clouds were to hold his attention until 1904, the year of Vroman’s final trip to the Southwest. Among his photographic preoccupations, clouds rivaled the dance.

Although after 1895 Vroman made photographs exposed specifically for clouds, “An Arizona Sky” continued to be a favorite. The image clearly represented a revelatory moment for the photographer. In his legacy albums, Vroman excluded the 1895 Snake Dance photographs but included, in album six, a platinum print of this first cloudscape, there captioned “On the Way to Moki Towns (Twin Buttes).” He later published it as the lead illustration for his 1901 Photo Era article “Photography in the Great Southwest.” He also distributed it for reproduction in popular publications. The Smithsonian’s Walter Hough reproduced the photograph in The Moki Snake Dance (1898), a promotional pamphlet for the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway, along with another photograph that pictured, as the caption “Arizona cloud effect” makes clear, a cloud photograph as such (Fig. 60). John Lawson Stoddard reproduced Vroman’s “An Arizona Sky” in one of his popular travel publications. In the last of a ten-volume series, Stoddard explored
Southern California, the Colorado River region (including the Painted Desert), and
Yellowstone National Park, and mistakenly included Vroman’s first Arizona cloudscape
as an example of the “mountains” of Southern California’s desert (Fig. 61).\(^{317}\)

In his pamphlet, Hough provided a description of the desert and its clouds that
emphasized the Painted Desert’s most distinguished feature: its color. Read alongside
Vroman’s images, Hough’s text suggests the camera’s greatest shortcoming. Waxed the
ethnologist:

> Here thousands of square miles stretch in iridescent beauty of the violet horizon
> or the velvety blue mountains… nearer stand the strange form of the volcanic
> buttes; across the sand plain the purple cloud shadows float…. The morning and
> evening reveal new coloring and beauty beyond the power of the pen or pencil to
> depict.\(^{318}\)

The halftone reproduction of Vroman’s cloudscape negative utterly failed to
communicate the desert colors Hough so enthusiastically described (Fig. 60).

Describing or reproducing the colors of the Painted Desert may have posed a
challenge to the poet or painter, but to the photographer it was an impossibility. In 1895,
photography’s inability to reproduce the color of the desert frustrated Vroman: “To show
in a satisfactory manner this wonderful peak of nature is difficult, the one thing lacking in
photography, Color is so important.”\(^{319}\) In 1901, Vroman commended his 1895
photographs of the Petrified Forest of the Painted Desert for giving “some ideas of the
topography of the country” but was quick to note their insurmountable failing. The
photographs, he wrote, “cannot give the colors, which are beautiful beyond

\(^{317}\) John L. Stoddard, *Southern California, Grand Cañon of the Colorado River, Yellowstone National Park*,
John L. Stoddard’s Lectures vol. 10 (1898; Chicago: Geo. L. Shuman & Co., 1912), 8. As with all
illustrations in the book, this one does not credit the photographer.

\(^{318}\) Walter Hough, *The Moki Snake Dance: A Popular Account of That Unparalleled Dramatic Pagan
Ceremony of the Pueblo of Indians of Tusayan, Arizona, with Incidental Mention of Their Life and
Customs* (Santa Fe: Passenger Department of the Santa Fe Route, 1898), 20.

\(^{319}\) Adam Clark Vroman, verso of photograph seventeen from “Trip to Arizona, 1895,” Horatio N. Rust
Photograph Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
As Vroman well understood, Euro-Americans identified colors—not clouds—as the Painted Desert’s most celebrated characteristic.

The earliest American account of the Painted Desert emphasized its colors and desolation. In 1857 and 1858, Lieutenant Joseph Christmas Ives of the Army Corp of Topographical Engineers, leading an overland expedition of the Grand Canyon to map the Colorado River and its tributaries, commanded one of the first official explorations of the desert on behalf of the United States. Balduin Möllhausen, the expedition’s artist, noted in his personal journal: “My thoughts and glances were all absorbed by the sublime scenery, seemingly in wild confusion, but arranged into a beautiful whole by the master’s hand.” Ives, on the other hand, dismissed the region as “altogether valueless.” The Painted Desert elicited his disdain. Its name, Ives opined, had been “appropriately given”; the clarity of the atmosphere allowed for an unobstructed view of miles of “barrenness and desolation” and of the “peculiar scenery [the Painted Desert] exhibits.” What was the peculiar scenery? With indifference, he noted the ubiquity of the variegated marl-topped blood-red sandstone of the mesas and buttes. As thick as fifteen hundred feet, the marls (clay and lime rock) were “red, blue, green, orange, purple, white, brown, lilac, and yellow…, interstratified with bands of purple, bluish-white, or mottled magnesian limestones.” The desert was ablaze in color.

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320 Adam Clark Vroman, “The Petrified Forest of Arizona,” Photo Era 6, no. 6 (June 1901): 431.
321 In 1540, during an expedition to the Colorado River region, the Spanish were the first Europeans to encounter and indeed christen “el pinatado desierto.” Goetzmann, Exploration and Empire, 306 and David H. Miller, “The Ives Expedition Revisited: Overland into the Grand Canyon,” Journal of Arizona History 13, no. 3 (Aug. 1972): 177.
322 Quoted in Miller, “The Ives Expedition Revisited,” 183.
324 Ibid., 76.
325 Ibid., 77.
Consistent with early accounts such as those of Ives and Möllhausen, turn-of-the-century writers described the Painted Desert both as an unrelenting waterless wasteland of “inhospitable rocks and sands” and as “God’s original palette.”\(^\text{327}\) Vroman was no doubt conversant with these ideas. In *The Indians of the Painted Desert* (1903), Vroman’s acquaintance George Wharton James declared that in the desert the “Master Artist” had reveled in color and there learned how to “distribute color throughout His world.”\(^\text{328}\) But for James the desert clouds contorted the beauty of the landscape: “when the sky is cerulean or black with lowering clouds…the color [of the desert] is weird, strange, mysterious.”\(^\text{329}\) Although James suffered the privations of the desert, writing of wandering under the “fiercely beating rays of the burning sun,” to him clouds portended danger. Gathering clouds brought “fearful and terrible” storms and floods that, without drainage systems in place, “equaled the rapids of the Colorado River.”\(^\text{330}\) The floods served as a powerful reminder of the dangers of the uncultivated—in Ives’s words, “altogether valueless”—desert.\(^\text{331}\)

Discernible in the writings of Möllhausen and James is an incipient aestheticizing approach to deserts of the western United States. This aesthetic tendency, which continued to develop in Euro-American culture, provides a context for understanding the creation and reception of Vroman’s cloudscapes. For example, the aesthetic appreciation of clouds features prominently in John Van Dyke’s *The Desert* (1901). This book by the


\(^{328}\) Ibid., 9 and xv.

\(^{329}\) Ibid., 25.

\(^{330}\) Ibid., 16 and xv.

\(^{331}\) James’s position is consistent with David W. Teague’s observation that, by the end of the nineteenth century, Americans understood the desert as a space between civilization and untamed (but potentially reclaimable) wilderness. See Teague, *The Southwest in American Literature: The Rise of the Desert Aesthetic* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 97.
Rutgers College art historian offered a highly influential reassessment of deserts not as places to test American ingenuity but as beautiful in themselves.\textsuperscript{332} “In sublimity—the superlative degree of beauty,” Van Dyke declared, “what land can equal the desert with its wide plains, its grim mountains, and its expanding canopy of sky!”\textsuperscript{333} Van Dyke was an adherent of English art critic John Ruskin, who had argued that the appreciation of beauty was not unique to art connoisseurship but available to anyone who could recognize it in nature. In \textit{Nature for Its Own Sake} (1893), Van Dyke asserted that Nature, left unfiltered by the imagination of the artist, was an art form that surpassed poetry and painting. Van Dyke wished to “call attention to that nature around us..., to show that light, form, and color are beautiful regardless of human meaning or use, to suggest what pleasure and profit may be derived from natural beauty....”\textsuperscript{334} In his 1901 study he applied these ideas, not novel in themselves, to the barren desert. One review considered Van Dyke’s approach “a revelation” for portraying Nature’s “glory, her grandeur, her mystery with an artist’s appreciation of color and with a Nature-lover’s enthusiasm for this somewhat novel and unusual part of the out-of-door world.”\textsuperscript{335}

Van Dyke had wandered the great American deserts of the West between 1898 and 1900. The fascination with clouds apparent in his desert study of 1901 was therefore fully concurrent with Vroman’s. Like Vroman, who may to have been acquainted with

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{332} Peter Wild, “A Western Sun Sets in the East: The Five ‘Appearances’ Surrounding John C. Van Dyke’s \textit{The Desert},” \textit{Western American Literature} 25, no. 3 (fall 1990): 217. Wild notes that \textit{The Desert} was a benchmark for all subsequent American desert writing, from Mary Austin to Edward Abbey.
\item \textsuperscript{333} John C. Van Dyke, \textit{The Desert: Further Studies in Natural Appearances}, illustrated ed. (1901; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 232.
\item \textsuperscript{334} John C. Van Dyke, \textit{Nature for Its Own Sake: First Studies in Natural Appearances}, 5th ed. (1896; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1908), x.
\item \textsuperscript{335} “In the Western Wastes,” \textit{The Dial} (Jan. 1, 1902): 23.
\end{itemize}
the art historian, the art historian, Van Dyke traversed the desert during the monsoon season of the summer months, which brought with it all of the cloud formations “known to the sky.” Again taking a cue from Ruskin, whose Storm Clouds of the Nineteenth Century (1884) provided scientific descriptions of cloud formations in addition to a consideration of their beauty, Van Dyke meditated on the physical characteristics, classification, and atmospheric effects of desert clouds. For example, he observed that although the dark nimbus shrouded the desert earth, cumuli gathered in bright white heaps of “turrets and domes of light,” while gauzy bands of stratus clouds and “feathery and fleecy” cirri accentuated the splendor of the desert sky. The clouds of the desert were no different from those found in other parts of the world, except that their “light, color, and background” made them “incomparably more brilliant and fiery.” Those clouds of overpowering and fierce white formed an unrivalled “celestial tapestry” that drew a heavenly “curtain of flame” between night and day.

Van Dyke’s writings worked to transform the Euro-American understanding of the desert and, in doing so, brought the desert clouds into the dominant cultural imagination. Vroman’s attentiveness to these “heavenly tapestries” was, however, not necessarily inspired by Van Dyke; after all, in 1895 Vroman had recognized in his first cloudscape a subject worthy of sustained consideration. Vroman nevertheless provides a

336 See Grinnell, “The Passing of a Bookman,” Pasadena Star News (July 26, 1916). In the eulogy, Grinnell mentions that Vroman’s bookstore was a “hamlet” for men like Holder, Boroughs, and Van Dyke. Vroman surely knew Charles Frederick Holder, Pasadena booster and founder of the Tournament of Roses parade, and was friends with naturalist John Burroughs.
338 Ibid., 102–103.
339 Ibid., 104.
340 Ibid., 104.
visual corollary to Van Dyke’s literary exploration. Indeed, his manner of photographing
the desert was as novel as Van Dyke’s approach to writing about it.\(^{341}\)

In 1893, the influential Charles Fletcher Lummis, with whom Vroman was
acquainted, had declared that the desert of New Mexico could not be “adequately
photographed.” “One can reproduce the features,” he argued, “but not the
expression…but not the wondrous lights.” For Lummis, color animated the desert like the
“soul” that animated “a plain face.”\(^{342}\) Lummis’s opinion was informed by decades of
American photographic tradition. After the Civil War, photographers such as Alexander
Gardner, William Bell, Timothy O’Sullivan, William Henry Jackson, and John K. Hillers
traversed the deserts of the Southwest, including the Painted Desert, making views that
emphasized the wild barrenness and topographical difficulties of a landscape in need of
settlement and development by white Americans.\(^{343}\)

Blank skies are a common feature of these photographs (Fig. 62). This is partly
attributable to wet plate technology, which is highly sensitive to spectral blue; but, had
they wished, early photographers of the desert could have circumvented that
technological barrier. In his 1879 photographs of Zuni, for example, Hillers used the wet

\(^{341}\) Emily Ballew Neff notes the simultaneous appearance of Van Dyke’s *The Desert* and Vroman’s interest
in photographing the desert; however, her discussion focuses on a new critical approach to the desert and
not on Van Dyke’s and Vroman’s shared fascination with the clouds. See Neff, “On Modern Ground,” in
*The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890–1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press; Houston:
Museum of Fine Arts, 2006), 130. The first 1901 printing of *The Desert* has a frontispiece that pictures a
landscape view of the Painted Desert, without clouds, captioned “Silence and Desolation.” In later
printings, including the 1922 printing consulted for this dissertation, halftone plates were added to the
book. Most of the plates contain blank skies; however, the plate in the “Desert Sky and Clouds” chapter
includes “cirrus, cumulus, and nimbus over desert mountains.”


\(^{343}\) In *Perpetual Mirage: Photographic Narratives of the Desert West* (New York: Whitney Museum of Art,
1996), which traces the development of the photography of the deserts of the American West from 1840
to 1996, the contributors note early-twentieth-century texts that mark a general shift in the approach to the
desert, including Charles Fletcher Lummis’s 1925 *Mesa, Cañon and Pueblo* (Van Dyke’s *The Desert*
goes unmentioned), but devote little attention to how the reassessment of the desert altered
photographers’ approach to the landscape of the region. Vroman’s cloudscapes, for example, are not
included in these discussions.
collodion process but managed to record cloud formations on a single negative (Fig. 63).

Working on behalf of the Bureau of American Ethnology, his primary objective was to record, in addition to ceremonials and other cultural practices, the architectural features of the village. Although he may have wished to capture the clouds on his plates, they were incidental to his mandate. By the 1860s and 1870s, combination printing, popularized by such noteworthies as Gustave Le Gray, Henry Peach Robinson, and Oscar Rejlander, was a widely practiced technique for the introduction of clouds to a final print. In the United States, Eadweard Muybridge made negatives of clouds and, in the darkroom, famously printed them in to his Yosemite Valley views. Around 1885, Jackson photographed the Painted Desert’s San Francisco Mountains. An extant 8 x 10 glass negative, now housed at the Denver Public Library, demonstrates that Jackson could capture clouds and landscapes on a single plate. Nevertheless, he later employed combination printing to add clouds to his mammoth prints of the mountains (Figs. 64 and 65). Like his predecessors, Vroman photographed the clouds over Puebloan villages and significant geological features. But, for him, the desert clouds were the primary subject matter.

Vroman photographed clouds even when the subject was outside of the scope of his duties. Frederick Webb Hodge’s diary of the Smithsonian’s 1899 photographic expedition to the Rio Grand Pueblos demonstrates, on the one hand, that the ethnologist took an active role in guiding the photographer’s choice of subject matter but, on the other hand, that Vroman sometimes strayed from his employer’s mandate in order to make cloud photographs. Hodge complained about Vroman’s proclivity for losing equipment during solitary forays into the desert, and he questioned the scientific value of
Vroman’s chosen themes. Although there is no demonstrable link between Vroman’s misplaced equipment and his pursuit of clouds, Hodge’s diary suggests a relationship. In the Cebollita Valley, Hodge noted,

Vroman went across the valley to photo the rather large cliff outlook near the ground in an arch-shape recess in the sandstone & on his way back to meet the wagon lost his photo bulb which necessitated my returning with him. I picked the bulb up near the cliff lodge. I looked for the cliff outlooks tucked away in the rock of the northern face of the southern mesa, but succeeded in noting but two, which were scarcely worth photographing.\footnote{Frederick Webb Hodge 1899 Expedition Diary, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.}

According to Hodge, Vroman made these pictures after he had photographed the lava beds and before photographing the ruins at Bibo Ranch. In the field, Vroman usually numbered negatives in the sequence in which they were exposed; he maintained the sequence (though not the original negative numbers) in the legacy albums dedicated to the 1899 trip and in an album he made immediately after the trip (now in a private collection). In the legacy and private albums, the photographs between the lava beds and the ruins portray billowing cumulus clouds hovering above a lone mesa (Figs. 66 and 67).

In Hodge’s estimation, a photograph of the mesa was of little scientific value. In Vroman’s, the cloud formation over the mesa was worthy subject matter that justified the expenditure of at least two negatives, both of which he would retain for himself. In fact, Vroman made many cloud studies of questionable scientific value during the expedition whose main purpose was to document the Rio Grande Pueblos. One incident particularly suggests the strength of Vroman’s desire to photograph clouds. At Zuni, according to Hodge, Vroman had taken to his bed because he felt “knocked out,” but he “could not
withstand the temptation in the afternoon to photo some beautiful cloud effects over [Thunder Mountain] and the village.”

After the expedition, Vroman developed the negatives and, in letters to Hodge, reported that he had captured “some good clouds around Zuni.” As he developed the Zuni plates, cloud effects were apparently a primary concern, for he remained silent on the quality of the images of the village itself. Vroman anticipated that, of the seven hundred 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 inch plates, three hundred would average “good,” another three hundred “poor to fair,” and one hundred “no good” and destined for the “scrap heap.” In fact, in the fourteen letters he wrote to Hodge as he developed the negatives, Vroman consistently judged the cloud effects “good” or “fine,” while he largely ranked the other subjects as fair, satisfactory, or “not so good.”

Vroman also expressed to Hodge his desire to retain and copyright all of the cloud negatives. He must have felt compelled not only to claim ownership of the images but also to mark them, by official means, as his original intellectual work. Although the cloud photographs were of uncertain scientific use to the Bureau of American Ethnology, Hodge evidently denied or ignored the photographer’s copyright request. Of the several dozen images Vroman would eventually copyright, none were cloud studies. In 1900 Vroman deposited two sets of prints of the images he wished to copyright at the Library of Congress, as was then required of photographers. These images were the only ones Vroman ever copyrighted. The images appeared as the face cards on a deck he published

345 Ibid., n.p.
346 Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, October 14, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
347 Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, October 16, 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA. In 1899, Vroman used 8 x 10 and 6 1/2 x 8 1/2 negatives to photograph landscapes and cloudscapes. He was extremely disappointed with 8 x 10 views and appears to have discarded the plates. He used 5 x 7 plates to make portraits.
348 See lots 3273 and 3333 in the Prints and Photographs Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, DC.
around 1900, “The American Indian Souvenir Playing Cards.” Although among the photographs reproduced on the cards there are two views that could possibly pass as cloudscapes, one above Acoma village and the other above Laguna (Fig. 68), they do not clearly belong to the genre.

If Vroman’s letters to Hodge suggest that he had loftier ambitions for his cloud photographs, why did he ultimately refrain from copyrighting them? Perhaps he came to understand that, by the standards of contemporary photography criticism, his cloudscapes were mere copies of nature and could not be considered the work of his intellect and imagination. For them to be accepted as such would have required Vroman to alter his approach to photography—to practice combination printing.

Clouds and the Triumph of Combination Printing

After 1895, Vroman traveled with equipment indispensable to the photography of clouds: orthochromatic (also referred to as isochromatic) glass plate negatives. “If fortune favors you,” Vroman noted in the pages of Photo Era,

you may find a background of such beautiful clouds as the light clear air of the south-west can produce. All day long these fleecy rolls of cotton-like vapor have tempted you, until you are in danger of using up all your Iso [i.e., orthochromatic] plates the first day out. You think there never can be such clouds again—but keep a few for tomorrow, they are a regular thing in this land of surprises.

The invention of orthochromatic plates resolved the decades-long difficulty of capturing a cloud and landscape on the same negative. In 1873, German chemist Hermann Wilhelm Vogel, who was Alfred Stieglitz’s first photography teacher, observed that negatives coated in collodion bromide emulsion were less sensitive to ultraviolet, violet, and blue wavelengths, a technical deficiency of the early wet collodion negative and of the gelatin

dry plate. Although orthochromatic photography was unable to reproduce color, photographers valued the technology for its ability to differentiate between “the contrasts of color, \textit{i.e.,} the differences of hue, and… the contrasts of light and shade, \textit{i.e.,} the relative brightness (luminosity or light intensity) of objects compared with one another under the existing conditions of illumination, and quite apart from their color.”

By the mid-1880s, manufactured orthochromatic plates were available on the market along with faster gelatin dry plates, which, while sensitive to spectral blue, were still useful for making “instantaneous” photographs.

For Vroman, as for his contemporaries, subject matter dictated the choice of negative. Portraits, ceremonies, and some Indian village views (those in which the sky was not of primary concern) called for rapid dry plates. For clouds and landscapes, photographers used orthochromatic plates. For landscapes, the negatives alone often sufficed. But the photography of clouds or clouds in the landscape required a yellow filter (a piece of colored glass inserted behind the lens board in the camera) of the proper tint. The filter, also called a screen,

was essential because of the delicacy of the luminous values of white clouds and blue sky…. With regard to the different cloud forms, some being strongly defined and others having more delicate values, it is obvious that a screen of deeper tint is required for the latter, while a light screen will suffice for heavier forms.

With the aid of a very pale yellow filter, a simultaneous exposure of both landscape and cloudscape on a single negative was possible; however, success depended on several variables, including the intensity of the ambient light. The yellow filter furthermore

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351 In his preparations to serve as Frederick Webb Hodge’s 1899 field photographer to New Mexico, Vroman ordered dozens of rapid dry plates manufactured by M. A. Seed and orthochromatic plates by Cramer. Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, June 1899, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers, Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
required longer exposure times, which imposed a slight haze on the landscape image. Simultaneous exposure with a filter also required more technical acumen of the photographer. To use a color screen, the photographer needed both “scientific knowledge and artistic appreciation of color.”

Vroman always used a single negative to photograph cloud formations, and he never made pure cloud photographs; the landscape always featured in them. His technical prowess in depicting clouds was not lost on his contemporaries. In the spring of 1900, Vroman sent a “beautiful set of photographs” (no doubt platinum prints) to Arkansas lumber baron Peter Goddard Gates, who was then staying at Zuni Pueblo. Captivated by Vroman’s work, later that year Gates commissioned an album of views and, as his correspondence with Vroman indicates, was most pleased with the results. Responding to a letter in which Vroman was evidently seeking affirmation, Gates exclaimed: “You ask if the book of views is worth to me the charge you make, I feel as though I was defrauding you in accepting it at the price, I expected most cheerfully to pay you more.” In the fall, Gates was in Pasadena and took time to review Vroman’s stock of images. He may have used the opportunity to select photographs for the commissioned album, and he was also permitted to take a few prints back to Arkansas. The precise subjects of the photographs Vroman gave to Gates are unknown, but they were, according to Gates, “greatly admired.” Given Gates’s increasing interest in the Southwest, he likely chose subjects typical of the region, including Pueblo Indian

354 Peter Goddard Gates to Adam Clark Vroman, April 8, 1900, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
355 Peter Goddard Gates to Adam Clark Vroman, December 26, 1900, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
ceremony and village views and portraits of Native sitters. But he reserved his highest praise for Vroman’s cloudscapes: “My friend, Mr. Hayward…thought the cloud effect must have been fixed up, until I assured him to the contrary.”356 This shows that Gates’s admiration of Vroman’s cloud photographs stemmed in part from the photographer’s resistance to darkroom trickery. Vroman rejected combination printing in favor of capturing cloudscapes and landscapes on a single negative. For Gates, that must have demonstrated remarkable technical achievement.

As a technical endeavor, however, Vroman’s cloudscapes fell short of the more artistically oriented practice espoused in contemporary photography criticism. In 1895, just months before Vroman made his first cloud view, British photographer Henry Peach Robinson declared in the pages of New York trade journal The Photographic Times that the sky was the weakest aspect of American landscape photography. Robinson’s opinions on photographic aesthetics made frequent appearances in American trade literature and in that literature were widely discussed by American critics. In particular, Robinson accused American landscape photographers of being too scientific in approach—too concerned with recording “the raw facts of nature” as they appeared to the “lens of the scientist,” not the “eye of the artist.”357 This reiterated a recommendation Robinson had made several decades prior in Pictorial Effects in Photography (1869), which argued that the “various effects of cloud and sky which may be introduced in landscape photography afford a vast scope for the display of the art capacity of the operator.”358 In that highly influential

356 Peter Goddard Gates to Adam Clark Vroman, December 14, 1900, Clark Wiedmann Collection of A. C. Vroman, NC.
358 Henry Peach Robinson, Pictorial Effect in Photography: Being Hints on Composition and Chiaroscuro for Photographers, to Which Is Added a Chapter on Combination Printing (London: Piper and Carter, 1869), 57.
book, Robinson distinguished “art capacity” from mere technical mastery. Writing at the height of the wet collodion era, he maintained that although “ingenious arrangements [had] been devised for the purpose of securing the sky on the same plate as the landscape,” it was nevertheless imperative that the operator “select the best and most picturesque nature he can get.”

Robinson saw selection as interpretive, as a way to avoid imitation. In practical terms, the process of selection Robinson had in mind involved combination printing, the selection of a separate cloud negative to be joined with a landscape.

By the end of the century, Robinson scolded American photographers for not adopting the approach he had recommended decades prior. He reminded American photographers in 1895 that ordinary landscapes accompanied by the “unsuggestive blankness” of a “plain white paper sky” were anathema to the artist, who recognized that even a cloudless sky enjoyed tonal gradations from deep to pale blue. Clouds—“the smiles and frowns of the sky”—were essential to the photographer’s endeavor to interpret nature. Robinson asserted further that the “artistic possibilities of the clouds [were] infinite.” A “properly selected cloud” gave the photographer mastery over the composition and enabled a chiaroscuro effect, both of which served to rescue the “art form from the machine.” Although Robinson admitted the infrequent advantage of photographing the sky together with the landscape on a single plate, he noted that, more often than not, such an attempt drew the photographer into a “semi-scientific state of mind.” In such a state, the photographer took more pleasure in conquering technical difficulties than in creating a harmonious composition evocative of artistic feeling and

359 Ibid., 56.
expression.\textsuperscript{360} Robinson’s instructions for the proper marshaling of clouds in a photographic print involved composite photography, or combination printing, a practice he widely championed.

Even before Robinson’s condemnation of American landscape photography, photographers in the United States had recognized that the addition of clouds could enhance landscape views. In 1891, Xanthus Smith, a Philadelphia painter, photographer, and tireless contributor to the photographic literature, encouraged his readers to introduce clouds to their more successful landscapes as a means of increasing the beauty of the view.\textsuperscript{361} The most common way, he noted, was to print in “fine skies” from a second negative. But Smith also voiced objections to the practice of combination printing. His first concern was the character of the sky itself. “A sky which photographs well,” he felt, “is so round and bold…that it is apt to take too much consequence in the picture.” In other words, in the combination print the clouds could threaten to overwhelm the landscape, particularly if the lighting of the clouds differed from that of the landscape. As a remedy, Smith suggested “put-on” clouds, painted on the verso of the negative.\textsuperscript{362}

Smith was not alone in questioning combination printing. Several years later, a contributor to \textit{The American Journal of Photography} also criticized the practice, declaring that the “union” of negatives was “too often an incompatible one.” “Besides[,] this species of faking,” he added, “is in nine cases out of ten patent to everyone. Few have the skill to make the picture without betraying the baldness of the device—the

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{362} Ibid., 194.
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opaque blankness attributed to wet days is preferable to this.”\textsuperscript{363} He recommended brushwork on the verso of the negative to bring the clouds and the landscape into harmony.

In 1904, writing in \textit{The Photographic Times}, John A. Hodges advocated the use of orthochromatic plates for capturing clouds and landscape together, and he equivocated on the matter of combination printing:

It is rather a vexed question as to whether it is better to secure clouds and landscape on the same plate, or to print in the sky from a separate negative. Some have stated that the fact is incompatible with high technical quality; but this view we do not share, regarding the question of technique as one dependent on the degree of skill possessed by the photographer. Therefore, if the cloud forms visible at the time of taking the landscape, in their disposition and general outline, are in harmony with it, and the photographer possesses sufficient technical skill to secure both on one plate, we can see no reason why that method of procedure should not be followed. But, on the other hand, it by no means follows that because the feat is technically possible a pictorial result will necessarily be obtained, for the cloud effect at the moment of taking the view may be, artistically considered, quite unsuitable for a good composition, and entirely out of harmony with the landscape portion of the picture.\textsuperscript{364}

Hodges favored the marriage of technical skill with “artistic perception,” but concluded his article with an admonition to proceed carefully in the darkroom in order to develop negatives of appropriate density for use in combination printing.

Despite the ambivalence apparent in some of the literature, American proponents of art photography overwhelmingly aligned themselves with Robinson and advocated combination printing. At the turn of the century, the look of clouds in landscape photographs became central to the dominant discourse on art photography in the United States. As British photographer A. Horsley Hinton reminded his American audience in 1897, clouds acted as “vehicles of beautiful thought” which, when added to an image

through combination printing, produced a superior photograph “made and controlled by an artist mind.” Combination printing represented an intervention that changed a mere photograph into a picture. It transformed what might have remained mere evidence of technical mastery into the product of artistic imagination.

An issue of the journal The Photo-Miniature dedicated entirely to clouds is representative of the American approach to the subject. The purpose of the special issue, its author Osborne I. Yellott maintained, was “simply to cover the technique of clouds photography,” but all of his advice presupposed combination printing. In fact, he minimized the role of technology. He dismissed orthochromatic plates as imperfectly adapted to capturing a landscape and a cloudscape on a single negative. The different sensitizers employed by each plate manufacturer introduced variables that were difficult to correct even with a color screen. Moreover, capturing both land and sky on a single plate offered no “pictorial possibilities.” Therefore, for the photographer of “high ideals,” combination printing was an “absolute necessity because it is seldom possible to secure clouds and foreground [i.e., landscape] on the same plate in their best possible relations and at the season and hour necessary for perfect results.”

Although Yellott maintained that the sky was one of the most important features of the landscape, he also cautioned combination printers to avoid “spectacular” cloud effects. As a rule, the sky should be “represented as subordinate to the landscape proper.” Consistent with general opinion on the matter, he advocated making cloud photographs “designed purely” for printing-in.

Negatives of “cloud-forms,” for which the photographer pointed his camera skyward,

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367 Ibid., 505.
were a “delightful hobby” for the meteorological enthusiast. Images made for combination printing ought to suggest perspective. As expressed by a contemporary of Yellott, the clouds must appear in “glorious” recession and “in the extreme distance…lose form and melt into the horizon.” By virtue of the artist’s intervention, a combination print was de facto a “creation of the imagination.” But a “truly imaginative work,” Hinton admonished in a 1904 issue of *The Photo-Miniature*, must be “so like to what nature might be as to appear as if gathered direct from nature.” The final print had to represent the artist’s “knowledge of nature which is born of close and persistent observation.” The combination print was thus seen as an expression of the photographer’s mastery not of technology but of nature (Figs. 69–71).

Writing the same year in *The American Annual of Photography*, Charles E. Fairman, secretary of the Washington, DC, Capital Camera Club, offered a critique of contemporary landscape photography similar to Robinson’s. Fairman, however, was more concerned about the recent stasis he observed in the development in America’s fine tradition of landscape photography. In a series of rhetorical questions, Fairman wondered if the quality of the work kept pace with the improvements…[in] mechanical facilities? Do improvements improve, or is this condition [i.e., the abject state of American landscape photography] due to the man behind the camera? Have they lost their grip; or have they been misled by the plates they are using…and the great change in method?

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370 Ibid., 490.
371 Ibid., 491.
For Fairman, the ideals of the early-twentieth-century photographer were misplaced. Modern technology held no promise for the progress of photography, particularly if “weakly” applied in the emulation of an obsolete era. Fairman located the genesis of American landscape photography on the frontier, expressly citing the photography produced for the Trans-Mississippi surveys of the 1860s and 1870s. The “pioneers in the field” wandered among “the unphotographed wildness of the Rockies, the Canon of the Colorado, the Yosemite and the Yellowstone” and “liv[ing] close to nature…interpreted her varying moods by…primitive methods” through the wet collodion process.\textsuperscript{372} To Fairman, the environment and technique hindered these early photographers’ expression of an “art feeling.” With regard to his contemporaries, Fairman saw little improvement. Although the early-twentieth-century “amateur” was now liberated from technical difficulties that had hounded the “pioneers,” the amateur mistakenly believed that “the gain in photography [was in]…the perfection of processes and mechanical appliances.” Contemporary landscape photographs continued to represent the influence of technology on the photographer rather than the “strong impress of the individuality of the man behind the camera.”\textsuperscript{373} For Fairman, amateurs in particular impeded the artistic development of landscape photography. This judgment directly associated the present-day amateur with the primitive approach to artistic production of photography’s pioneers.

As a bookstore owner, Kodak dealer, and enthusiastic amateur photographer, Vroman was certainly familiar with such assessments. Yet he declined to alter his photographic practice in light of them. As was the case with that first cloudscape of 1895, he continued to photograph landscape and cloudscape on a single negative and to make

\textsuperscript{372} Fairman, “The Direction of Photographic Progress,” 133.
\textsuperscript{373} Ibid., 134.
contact prints from the single negative. According to the critical opinion on cloud
photography outlined above, Vroman’s approach at best represented a preliminary step
toward building the prescribed stock of cloud negatives for combination printing.\footnote{374}

Vroman appears to have recognized himself as the type of primitive amateur described by
Fairman. He admitted as much in a 1901 letter to Smithsonian ethnologist Frederick
Webb Hodge. There, referring to offprints of his recent \textit{Photo Era} articles that he was
having sent to Hodge, he added, “[o]f course [the photographs] are ‘Amateurish’ but—
!”\footnote{375} Vroman’s cloudscapes featured prominently in the first article of the \textit{Photo Era}
series.

Vroman understood the debate distinguishing amateur from art photography and
assumed an implicit repudiation of his work. In this way, the 1901 caption, “Moki Towns
(A Sky That the Camera Could Not Get),” not only summarizes Vroman’s photographic
vision of the Southwest, it also positions his practice against the contemporary discourse
on American art photography. In the caption, the camera, not the photographer, failed to
“get” the sky. By minimizing, perhaps even denying, intellectual intervention in his
picture-making process, Vroman instead attributed operational agency to the mechanical
apparatus. Surely he could have altered his practice to conform to contemporary
expectations of art photography; he experimented with all manner of negatives, cameras,
lenses, darkroom supplies, and printing papers. But he chose to remain like the amateur
described by contemporaries as an “operator having to run about after [the clouds],”\footnote{376}

\footnote{374} On compiling stocks of cloud negatives, see Alice Lee Snelling-Moqué, “Cloud Land,” \textit{The
Photographic Times} 28, no. 9 (Sept. 1896): 406; J. A. Anderson, “Skies,” in \textit{The American Annual of
Photography and Photographic Times Almanac for 1904} (New York: Scovill & Adams Co., 1904), 113;
\footnote{375} Adam Clark Vroman to Frederick Webb Hodge, February 14, 1901, Frederick Webb Hodge Papers,
Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
\footnote{376} Anderson, “Skies,” 117.
one of “those struggling amateurs…inclined to take any old thing Nature will give them in the way of clouds and leave them where they are.”³⁷⁷ Altering his practice and aligning it with the artistic expectations of the time would have secured his work a more distinguished position within American art photographic circles. Why did Vroman refuse?

**Chasing Clouds**

Vroman did “run about” after clouds. On Smithsonian expeditions and independent trips to the Southwest, he and his camera navigated the Arizona and New Mexico Territories as if beckoned by the clouds. Even on official expeditions, when the left to his own devices, Vroman would turn his attention to the sky. In the Pasadena Public Library legacy albums, he consistently used the cloud photographs as a kind of preamble to his arrival at Pueblo Indian villages. He frequently captioned the cloud sequences “On the Way…,” as in “On the Way to Hopi Towns,” “On the Way to Acoma,” “On the Way to Zuni” (Figs. 72–74). From this it is unmistakable that he imagined the clouds leading him from one village to the next.

By far the most extensive series is “On the Way to Hopi Towns,” made during a 1902 trip with friends to watch the Hopi Snake Dance at Oraibi. It consists of twenty photographs preserved in legacy album fourteen at the Pasadena Public Library. The first two images in the series represent specific landmarks of the Painted Desert, noted in the handwritten captions as “Hawthorne’s Ranch” and “Leroux Wash.” Presumably the first represents the starting point of the party’s journey (Fig. 75). The cabin, outbuilding, and wagon of “Hawthorne’s Ranch”—all signs of civilization—are veiled in a shadow cast by

immense clouds, which themselves are glowing white. As the individual cumuli in foreground recede into the distance, they appear to multiply, giving way to a legion of increasingly indistinct clouds. These harbingers of rain seem poised to lead the photographer into the bright light of the distant landscape, toward the Hopi villages. Consistent with the other cloud series, distant mesas, gentle hills, and flat expanses dotted with desert shrubs feature beneath the cloudscapes that accompanied the travelers. In the final photograph of the series, Vroman depicted the party in the two horse-drawn wagons that had carried them across the desert (Fig. 76). In the cloud-filled sky, one distinct puff, positioned as if to bless and welcome, hovers over the modest wagon train. The flat landscape gives little idea of the distance traversed, but the clouds suggest a kind of celestial map that traces the path traveled to the destination, the Hopi Snake Dance.

The dance itself was in fact the subject of Vroman’s one attempt at composite photography.\textsuperscript{378} For it, he united two Snake Dance negatives, one made in Oraibi in 1900 and the other in Walpi in 1901. William Henry Jackson’s Detroit Photographic Company later distributed the image as a chromolithographic postcard. It is possible that Vroman devised his composite photograph of the dance for the purposes of the postcard view. But Vroman may have had other reasons for making the image. His manipulation of the negatives to create a fictitious iteration of the ceremony points to his wish, as he put it in 1895, to “be one of them” (e.g., a member of the Snake or Antelope clan).\textsuperscript{379} The Snake Dance captured much of Vroman’s attention from 1895 to 1904 (see chapter 1) and must have informed his understanding of desert clouds and their representation in photography.

\textsuperscript{378} See photograph number 1271 1/2 in Pasadena Public Library legacy album twelve.
\textsuperscript{379} Adam Clark Vroman, verso of photograph fourteen from “Trip to Arizona, 1895,” Horatio N. Rust Photograph Collection, The Huntington Library, San Marino, CA.
In Vroman’s desire to comprehend the dance and other Pueblo Indian practices and customs, he avidly collected and read ethnographic studies. Contemporary ethnologists identified the Snake Dance as fundamentally a prayer for rain, a beckoning of rain clouds to the Hopi villages.\textsuperscript{380} In the ethnographic literature that Vroman knew, Hopi cosmology was understood as a system of oppositions.\textsuperscript{381} Writing in 1896, Hopi ethnologist Jesse Walter Fewkes used Cartesian terms to ascribe to the Hopi a recognition of man’s “double nature, corresponding to body and soul.” He claimed that the Hopi corollary of the soul, the “breath-body,” was shared with nature and “likewise forms an essential part of objects of human manufacture.”\textsuperscript{382} Moreover, Fewkes attributed to the Hopi the belief that, upon a person’s death, the “breath-body or shade” passes into the underworld, where it engages “in the same pursuits followed on earth”—farming, making pottery, observing ceremonies, etc.—only in alternation with those practiced by residents of the upper world. The sequence of day and night, of the seasons, and of ceremonial calendars was reversed in the upper and lower worlds. “[T]he Snake drama on earth,” Fewkes wrote, “is celebrated in August, but in the under-world it occurs in January, and in that month the Snake and Antelope chiefs, out of sympathy, erect their lodges of palladia.”\textsuperscript{383} Another contemporary authority on Hopi ethnology was Methodist missionary Heinrich Voth. According to a Hopi oral tradition documented by him at Oraibi, in the underworld the breath-bodies of the dead were transformed into clouds.

\textsuperscript{380} As outlined in chapter 1, in the short time Vroman was active in the Southwest, ethnologists redefined the Snake Dance as a supplication for rain, supplanting earlier thinking that had identified the ceremony as snake worship.


\textsuperscript{382} Jesse Walter Fewkes, “The Prehistoric Culture of Tusayan,” \textit{American Anthropologist} 9, no. 5 (May 1896): 161.

\textsuperscript{383} Ibid., 162.
With observances such as the Snake Dance, the living summoned them from sacred openings in the earth back to the villages. As clouds, the dead brought rain to the upper world. In return, the living made offerings to the dead—prayers, sacred objects representing rain, and cloud symbols depicted on the ground with sand and cornmeal. In other words, the living depended on the dead to shower them with life-sustaining rain, and the dead were nurtured with offerings made by the living. Their worlds were interconnected. The clouds had their genesis in the underworld, and they entered the atmosphere from openings in the earth. The clouds sprang from the landscape.

Vroman’s method of cloud photography maintained the relationship the Hopi identified between the desert clouds and the desert landscape. He seems also to have been aware of the ethnographic literature that identified the Grand Canyon as a sacred site. Fewkes had identified the Grand Canyon as one of the sites of Hopi emergence from the underworld, a place from which the living summoned the clouds, the breath-bodies of the Hopi dead, to their desert home. In album fourteen, as a kind of prologue to Vroman’s largest cloud sequence, five photographs of the Grand Canyon precede the twenty-photograph “On the Way to Hopi Towns” series (Figs. 77 and 78). From the first to the last photograph of the Grand Canyon, the clouds increase in number and volume, as if steadily materializing as Vroman prepared himself for the journey to the 1902 Snake Dance in Oraibi.

Like that of his more learned contemporaries, Vroman’s understanding of Hopi customs and beliefs was necessarily incomplete (and at times wrong). Nevertheless, his

385 See also Elsie Clews Parsons, Pueblo Indian Religion, vol. 1, Bison Books ed. (1939; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), 207.
diaries and handwritten captions suggest that he at least recognized the local significance of desert clouds and their important connection to the Snake Dance and other ceremonials. Unlike contemporaries George Wharton James, Sumner Matteson, and Heinrich Voth, Vroman never entered a kiva and so did not photograph the cloud symbols rendered with sand and corn during the Snake Dance; however, he was sensible to the cloud symbols he spied during public components of the ceremonies. At Walpi and Mishongnovi, the Flute Ceremony was celebrated every even year in August, alternating with the Snake Dance. In 1900, Vroman was present at both villages for the observance. (The Flute Ceremony was observed every odd year at Oraibi, again in alternation with the Snake Dance. Vroman photographed the 1901 Oraibi observance, but did not include prints from these negatives in the legacy albums.) With his camera, he trailed the participants as they wended their way down and around First Mesa and Second Mesa, respectively, and drew symbols of clouds on the desert floor with cornmeal. Handwritten notations like “Cloud Symbol” or “Making the Cloud Symbol” accompany the platinum prints in the legacy albums. In addition, the ethnographic literature would have taught him to recognize the patches of white paint on the limbs of Flute participants as cloud symbols identical to those that adorned members of the Snake and Antelope clans during their observance of the Snake Dance. Aside from his dance views, the portraits Vroman made of Snake and Antelope priests at Walpi in 1901 were the closest he came to capturing the symbolic clouds of the snake ceremony (Fig. 79).

The best expression of Vroman’s understanding of Hopi ceremonies in relation to the desert clouds is found in his cloudscapes and the process he used to make them. Vroman surely knew that for the Hopi the clouds and landscape were inextricably,
cosmically linked. As a student of ethnology, he may well have appreciated that a basic feature of his view camera in fact underscored the correspondence: The images he saw on the ground glass were upside down. They reversed the terrestrial sites of emergence and the clouds that sprang from them.

Hopi cosmology provides an alternative context—within Vroman’s reach but far outside the bounds of contemporary photography criticism—for understanding Vroman’s approach to cloud photography. By always capturing clouds and landscape on a single plate, he rejected what composite photography implied in its detachment of the clouds from the land. Composite photography would have required him to sever the cosmic relationship and thereby his own imagined ties to the Hopi. Instead, with single-plate cloud photography, he preserved the correlation of land and clouds that was understood as sacred to the Hopi. Being familiar with both photography and ethnographic literature, Vroman understood that, from the point of view of photographic criticism, his approach to the photography of clouds was irredeemably, fatally amateurish, primitive, and savage. From a purely photographic point of view, Vroman’s obstinacy may have been grounds for dismissing him as incurious and retrograde. However, his experience in the Southwest and his familiarity with then-current understandings of Hopi cosmology provided a personally compelling reason to reject the prescriptions of art photography. With his cloud photographs, he may have seen himself as exploring principles greater than those of art.

In 1983, Hopi photographer Victor Masayesva wrote, “[p]hotography reveals to me how it is that life and death can be so indissolubly one; it reveals the falseness of maintaining…opposites as separate. Photography is an affirmation of opposites; the
negative contains the positive.”³⁸⁶ Masayesva’s analogy echoes the relationship discussed above between the underworld and the world of the living, the clouds and the landscape. As death contains life, so the negative contains the positive. Although Vroman could not have conceived of his photographic project in precisely the terms used by Masayesva, practices and beliefs local to the Hopi mesas appear to have informed what and how he chose to photograph.

In the case of Gertrude Käsebier, Elizabeth Hutchinson proposes that the photographer took American Indian art as “an attitudinal, not formal, model” by which she established her own identity as primitivist artist.³⁸⁷ Vroman’s imagined relationship can be said to represent the opposite. In attitude, he resisted the characterization of his photographic approach as primitive; however, in his cloudscapes he appropriated Hopi cosmology to carve out a subject matter and formal expression of his own. By uniting content and technique, imagining them as indissolubly one, Vroman created an unprecedented photographic vision of the American Southwest.

³⁸⁷ Hutchinson, The Indian Craze, 146.
Conclusion

This dissertation has demonstrated that Vroman’s relationship with Smithsonian science fundamentally shaped his photographic practice. The ethnographies he studied influenced the content, technique, and form of arguably his most significant achievement: the cloudscapes. From my consideration of these and other relations, there emerges not only an essential context for interpreting Vroman’s work but also a richer understanding of the deep connections between turn-of-the-century anthropological and photographic discourses. We have come to see how anthropology helped photography critics define the medium as both a savage art and civilized science. And it has become clear how social evolutionary theory placed American photography on a path toward becoming a fine art.

While this dissertation has made a case for the importance of anthropological theory in photographic circles around 1900 in the United States, it leaves to others the task of considering how the relationship developed as both fields underwent profound transformation in subsequent decades. Can post-World War I anthropology help us to understand American modernist photography? Did the anthropological concept of primitive art, which underwent revisions, remain relevant to the field of photography? As is the case with Vroman, can contemporary anthropology inform our understanding of figures such as Alfred Stieglitz, Paul Strand, and Ansel Adams as they endeavored to create a novel approach to photography as art?

In 1927, Franz Boas published *Primitive Art*, a study that summarized decades of his thinking on the subject. Here he countered arguments by social evolutionary theorists, such as William H. Holmes (see chapter 3), who had argued that primitive art was devoid
of imagination, of “ideas of the beautiful,” and was “all but impotent in the presence of technique.”

For Holmes, the fixity of forms in primitive decorative art may have allowed for the development of a virtuosic technique, but it also demonstrated the inability of the savage or barbarian artist to interpret nature. To the contrary, Boas maintained that fixed forms were intimately connected to ideas of beauty; they were not indicative of an intellectual failing or a lack of imagination on the part of the artist. Rather, Boas asserted, “since a perfect standard of form can be attained only in a highly developed and perfectly controlled technique[,] there must be an intimate relation between technique and a feeling for beauty.”

Boas dispensed with social evolutionary notions that the slavish imitation of nature was indicative of savagery and barbarism. To him, technical mastery in itself was an expression of the imagination. The primitive artist was therefore capable of aesthetic feeling.

The aesthetics of technique was central to Boas’s argument about the development of artistic practice. True artistic work could only begin, Boas maintained, “after the technical problem has been mastered.” To support this claim, the anthropologist pointed to the technical struggles primitive artists had to overcome when introduced to the unfamiliar tools of a new medium. Boas used draftsmanship as an example. “When primitive man is given a pencil and paper,” wrote Boas, “and asked to draw an object in nature, he has to use tools unfamiliar to him, and a technique that he has never tried. He must break away from his ordinary methods of work and solve a new problem.” Indeed, when any “tyro attempts to create a work of art…the finished

390 Ibid., 65.
391 Ibid., 65.
product teaches only his vain effort to master a difficult task.**392** Technical mastery, though, eventually leads to the invention of new forms. Such invention is evidence of “a strong power of visualization which manifests itself when the person…can give free play to the imagination.”**393**

Boas’s emphasis on the aesthetics of technique is remarkably similar to language adopted by American modernist photographers as early as the 1920s and into the 1930s. In 1932, for example, members of Group *f.64* declared that photography would now be an art form by simple and direct presentation through purely photographic methods. The Group will show no mark at any time that does not conform to its standards of pure photography. Pure photography is defined as possessing no qualities of technic, composition or idea, derivative of another art form.**394**

In Boasian terms, *f.64* had broken with “ordinary methods of work” (art principles associated with painting and printmaking) and had mastered the technique of a tool (the camera, a tool relatively new to visual art) formerly unfamiliar to them. Although he would later distance himself from an aesthetics of technique,**395** in 1935 Ansel Adams conceived of technique as an important “transitional” concern in the formation of art photography. The photographer noted that a major achievement of *f.64* was in “the exposition of the fact that diverse personal tendencies can be expressed through a similar approach to the medium (technically and intellectually).” To Boas, technical mastery was preliminary to the creation of art. In mastering the technique of photography, these photographers proved the medium, much like paint and paintbrush, to be a sufficiently

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**392** Ibid., 64.
**393** Ibid., 157–158.
**394** Quoted in *Seeing Straight: The f.64 Revolution in Photography*, ed. by Therese Thau Heyman (Oakland, CA: Oakland Museum of Art, 1993), 53.
adaptable tool by which, in Adams’s words, to “interpret with beauty and power the wide spectrum of emotional experience.” Read alongside Boas, Adams’s assertion suggests that modernist photographers had, much like the primitive artist, passed through phases of technical mastery to invent new forms.

Boas’s anthropology of art also finds parallels in histories, told by modernism’s adherents, of the development of “straight” or “pure” photography in the United States. In 1922, Paul Strand provided such a history with the publication of “Photography and the New God,” an essay in defense of Stieglitz. As Maria Hambourg has explained, Strand saw in Stieglitz’s “use of a machine (the camera)...a future in which the scientific search for truth and precision and the artistic search for truth and feeling would be united in photography.” But Strand also provided a lineage for Stieglitz which, in its early stages, is suggestive of Boas’s primitive artist working to master the technique of a new medium. Strand commended Scottish painter David Octavius Hill’s early calotype portraits (circa 1843) for their “utmost simplicity,” citing this simplicity as evidence of “the naïveté and freedom from all theory with which Hill approached his new medium.” Despite the “primitive machine and materials” with which Hill was obliged to work, the portraits, according to Strand, “remain the most extraordinary assertion of the possibility of the utterly personal control of a machine, the camera.” Strand argued that Hill’s portraits fell into obscurity at the same time that significant technological advancements were made in the field. Around 1880, “the invention of the dry plate, the improvements in

396 Quoted in Seeing Straight, 61.
398 Paul Strand, “Photography and the New God,” in Classic Essays on Photography, ed. by Alan Trachtenberg (New Haven: Leete’s Island Books, 1980), 146–147. Strand failed to mention Hill’s partner, Robert Adamson. Hill is known to have arranged the pair’s portrait sitters, and Adamson to have operated the camera.
lenses and printing papers” produced in photography “greater certainty and ease of manipulation.” At the same time, inexplicably, began a period of “misconception of the inherent qualities of the new medium.” “We find,” Strand asserted,
a singular lack of perception and respect for the basic nature of the photographic machine. At every turn the attempt is made to turn the camera into a brush, to make a photograph look like a painting, an etching, a charcoal drawing or whatnot, like anything but a photograph.…. [F]ortunately…a few photographers are demonstrating in their work that the camera is a machine and a very wonderful one. They are proving that in its pure and intelligent use it may become an instrument of a new kind of vision…. It has taken nearly eighty years for this clarification of the actual meaning of photography to reach from the remarkably true but instinctive approach to David Octavius Hill, to the conscious control embodied in the recent work of Alfred Stieglitz.399

Hill’s initial instinctive grappling with the techniques imposed on him by the new medium were a prelude to Stieglitz’s own technical mastery—“the control of [photography’s] mechanism and materials”—that made the camera an “instrument of intuitive knowledge,” a conduit for the expression of the imagination.400

Strand also maintained that the shortcomings that had plagued photography’s adolescence were not inherent to the medium but the fault of its errant practitioners. The photographer took issue not with figures like Vroman, whose photographic legacy had fallen into obscurity by the 1920s, but with Vroman’s contemporaries: the Pictorialists. Evidently, to paraphrase Boas, these practitioners exhibited an inability to break away from traditional methods of art production in order to solve the technical and aesthetic problems presented by the introduction of the camera. In Boasian terms, these photographers were “artisans,” not artists, whose imaginations failed to rise beyond the “level of copyists.” Unlike social evolutionary theorists, for Boas the “copyist” was not an imitator of nature. Instead, Boas’s copyist looked to “familiar motives composed in

399 Ibid., 147–148.
400 Ibid., 150.
customary ways.” In other words, the copyist imitated established artistic tradition. In their endeavor to produce art photography, Pictorialists had turned to what was familiar and customary in the canon of Western fine art. They imitated painting. In their failure to master the camera, Pictorialists were powerless to create—to invent—new art forms. By this very fact, the photographs produced by the Pictorialists embodied none of the markers of the artistic imagination.

If after World War I the discourses of photography may have been reliant on those of anthropology, then the pre-history of Vroman’s canonization in the 1960s merits revision. In 1937, Beaumont Newhall curated the famous exhibition *Photography, 1839–1937* for the Museum of Modern Art. The museum’s press release describes the arrangement of the show as “a step by step…evolution of photography from the first public announcement of Daguerre’s process in 1839 to the present.” Arranged in this way, the exhibition demonstrated “the particular characteristics of different techniques, the artistic qualities of each process, and the relation of the technical and esthetic developments of photography….” The exhibition catalog includes a foreword by Newhall in which the curator raised the all-important question: “Is photography art?” “Ever since its inception,” Newhall wrote in a section titled “Esthetics of Primitive Photography,”

photography has been confused with all other graphic processes. From time immemorial, pictures had been made only by human hands. Suddenly, a mechanical method of producing them was presented to an astonished world. Confusion and comparison between the two methods was natural and inevitable.403

Newhall turned to early—“primitive”—photography to locate “standards of criticism generic to photography.” Any criticism of photography, Newhall maintained, had to be “examined in terms of the optical and chemical laws which govern [the medium’s] production.” He located two basic characteristics of the photograph—detail and tonality—dependent on optical and chemical laws, respectively. In primitive photography, these characteristics, or laws, were oppositional. The daguerreotype was dependent on optics for its extraordinary rendering of detail, and the calotype on chemistry for its “fine range of shimmering tones.” In fact, Louis-Désiré Blanquart-Evrard’s improvements to the calotype process were, to Newhall, a “significant step in the esthetic development of photography, for it is one of the first times that a purely chemical, as distinguished from manual, method of altering a camera’s image was proposed.” Blanquart-Evrard had rectified a photographic deficiency by looking to the laws governing photography. Much like Boas’s primitive, the French experimentalist had circumvented a technical problem by improving upon techniques specific, or inherent, to the medium.

“Straight” photography seems to have represented, for Newhall, a synthesis of the oppositional characteristics that distinguished the work of photography’s primitives. In his analysis of Strand’s work, Newhall found in the photographer “a brilliant technician” who, using “every photographic means to obtain the results he wishes,” was able to wed “lighting”—in other words, chiaroscuro or tonality—with detail. Strand’s work thus captured “the lyrical quality of nature and of man.” Although Newhall distinguished

404 Ibid., 41.
405 Ibid., 44.
406 Ibid., 38.
407 Ibid., 71–72.
between photographers who made art and those who used the camera to make records, both had potential to produce virtuosic examples of photography. The best photography of any kind, asserted Newhall, “lies in the photographer’s knowledge of his medium.” Photographers in both camps had one thing in common: their technical mastery of the tools specific to photography.

Historians have consistently criticized Newhall’s aestheticizing approach to the medium. Alison Bertrand has gone further. She sees as contradictory Newhall’s definition of “photographic art as a technologically determined product of the camera and, at the same time, a unique creation of an autonomous author.” Bertrand cites the contradiction as evidence of Newhall’s incomplete understanding of the theoretical foundations of the fine arts. In Boasian anthropology, however, technique and artistic invention were not contradictory but rather intimately, indeed necessarily, connected. Was Newhall familiar with Boas’s work? Boas’s *Primitive Art* was first published in 1927 in an obscure Norwegian scholarly series; it received recognition as one of his seminal texts only after his death in 1942. This does not necessarily preclude an awareness of the book on Newhall’s part. In his capacity as a librarian and then a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, Newhall could have sought out the publication in the context of the “discovery” of primitive art by modernist Primitivists such as Pablo Picasso or Henri Matisse.

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408 Ibid., 76.
By the 1960s, the decade of Vroman’s re-discovery, with modernist photography on firm art historical footing, Newhall had moved on from an aesthetics of technique. Nevertheless, if we can read a Boasian approach in Newhall’s earlier groundbreaking work, where might that leave Vroman? How might Vroman have satisfied Newhall’s decidedly anthropological approach? According to the terms of Boas’s anthropology of art and Newhall’s history of photography, Vroman’s emphasis on technique inherent to the camera would have delivered him from the savagery ascribed to him around 1900. But Vroman was no “brilliant technician” comparable to a Strand or an Adams. He was only a precursor of those who would fully come to master photographic technique and—most significantly—to create new aesthetic forms. Vroman thus remained a primitive.
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Figure 57. Adam Clark Vroman, Clouds over the Arizona Desert, near the Hopi Mesas, AZ, 1901. Glass plate negative. Autry Museum of the American West, Los Angeles, CA.
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fifty miles he may see neither man nor beast. The villages, if such they can be called, are merely clusters of rude huts dotting an area of rocky desolation. No trees are visible. No grazing-ground relieves the dismal monochrome of sand. The mountains stand forth dreary, gaunt, and naked. In one locality the train runs through a series of gorges the sides of which are covered with disintegrated rock, heaped up in infinite confusion, as if an awful ague-fit had seized the hills, and shaken them until their ledges had been broken into a million boulders. At another point, emerging from a maze of mountains, the locomotive shoots into a plain, forty or fifty miles square, and studded on every side by savage peaks. Once, doubtless, an enormous lake was held encompassed by these giants; but, taking advantage of some seismic agitation, it finally slipped through their fingers to the sea, and now men travel over its deserted bed. Sometimes these monsters seemed to be closing in upon

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Figure 74. Adam Clark Vroman, “On the Way to Zuni (Clouds),” NM, 1897. Platinum print. From album seven at the Pasadena Public Library, Pasadena, CA.
Figure 75. Adam Clark Vroman, “On the Way to Hopi Towns (1) (Hawthorne Ranch),” AZ, 1902. Platinum print. From album fourteen at the Pasadena Public Library, Pasadena, CA.
Figure 76. Adam Clark Vroman, “On the Way to Hopi Towns (20),” AZ, 1902. Platinum print. From album fourteen at the Pasadena Public Library, Pasadena, CA.
Figure 77. Adam Clark Vroman, “Grand Canoñ [sic] of the Colorado,” AZ, 1902. Platinum print. From album fourteen at the Pasadena Public Library, Pasadena, CA.
Figure 78. Adam Clark Vroman, “Grand Canoñ [sic] of the Colorado,” AZ, 1902. Platinum print. From album fourteen at the Pasadena Public Library, Pasadena, CA.
Figure 79. Adam Clark Vroman, “Taqui, A Moki Snake Priest,” Walpi, First Mesa, AZ, 1901. Published by Detroit Photographic Co. Chromolithograph. Private collection.
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