

National Gallery of Art

NEWS RELEASE

PRESS PREVIEW, FEBRUARY 15, 2000
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
February 8, 2000

PRESS CONTACT:
Deborah Ziska (202) 842-6353
FOR IMAGES: (202) 842-6360

**EXHIBITION OF MASTERWORKS BY CARLETON WATKINS
INCORPORATES VICTORIAN-ERA STEREOSCOPES
AND STATE-OF-THE-ART THREE-DIMENSIONAL IMAGING TECHNOLOGY
ON INTERACTIVE COMPUTERS**

National Gallery of Art, February 20 – May 7, 2000

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Visitors to Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perception will not only see Watkins' breathtaking photographs of the American West, but also will be able to explore his work on interactive computers, using state-of-the-art three-dimensional imaging technology, and on original Victorian-era stereoscopes. Watkins (1829-1916) is today considered the finest American landscape photographer of the nineteenth century. The exhibition of more than 90 photographs, on view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art, February 20 through May 7, 2000, presents many photographs never reproduced or exhibited before this tour. The show was previously seen in San Francisco and New York; Washington is its final venue.

The exhibition is supported by The Henry Luce Foundation, Inc., and the National Endowment for the Humanities. In-kind support is provided by SGI and Stereographics.

"Carleton Watkins' pioneering work, created more than a century ago, remains unsurpassed in its aesthetic sophistication, poetic vision, and technical craftsmanship. Watkins worked under extremely difficult conditions but was able to produce some of the most accomplished photographs ever made," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art.

With photographs on loan from museum, corporate, university, and private collections throughout North America, the exhibition includes more than 70 mammoth or large-format prints (many measuring up to 18 by 22 inches), several panoramic photographs—works placed side-by-side to orchestrate a vast sweep of visual terrain—and many stereo views. The stereo views—two small photographs, which when placed in a special optical viewer give their beholder the startling sensation of three-dimensional depth—will be hung in the exhibition and also displayed in Victorian-era stereoscopes and in a novel interactive computer base.

-more-

Work from Watkins' famous series of the pristine and then virtually unknown Yosemite Valley will be on view. These images helped convince President Abraham Lincoln to sign the Yosemite Bill in 1864, an important precedent in establishing the present system of national parks. The photographs were exhibited at the 1867 International Exposition in Paris, where they were awarded a first-prize medal, and were later seen by Napoleon III. There are also many other, often lyrical, images that captured not only the physical landscape of the American West, including the Columbia River and the rugged Pacific Coast, but also the burgeoning mining activity in the Sierra foothills that followed the Gold Rush and the boom towns that sprang forth along the routes of the newly built Central and Southern Pacific railroads. In addition to sweeping vistas, there are studies of trees and surprising close-ups of lily pads and a crate of peaches.

Born and raised in Oneonta, New York, Watkins settled in San Francisco at the height of the Gold Rush, taking up the still-new medium of photography in the mid-1850s. During his career of more than 30 years he intrepidly traveled the western United States, hauling heavy equipment and supplies to remote areas and at times losing glass-plate negatives when his mule tripped. Nonetheless, he made thousands of remarkable, historically important photographs that were admired by an international audience. By 1895, however, poor business sense, failing health, and bad luck left him and his family living in a railroad boxcar. In 1906, when he was almost totally blind, much of his life's work was destroyed by the most violent earthquake to strike San Francisco. Watkins died ten years later, a patient at the Napa State Hospital for the Insane.

The exhibition catalogue, published by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, features more than 100 tritone plates—including four gatefolds illustrating Watkins' rarely reproduced panoramas—and twenty duotone illustrations. An introduction by Maria Morris Hambourg, curator in charge of the department of photographs at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; a scholarly essay by Douglas R. Nickel, associate curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and biographical material by Peter E. Palmquist, an independent scholar and Watkins biographer, are included. The catalogue is available in softcover (\$35) in the Gallery's Shops, through the Gallery Web site at www.nga.gov, or by calling 1-800-697-9350. A hardcover version (\$60), co-published with Harry N. Abrams, is also available through the Gallery or at booksellers nationwide.

Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perception was curated by Nickel and Hambourg; the organizing curator for the National Gallery is Sarah Greenough, curator of photographs. The exhibition was organized by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in association with The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and with special cooperation from the Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino, California.

The National Gallery of Art and Sculpture Garden, located on the National Mall between Third and Ninth Streets at Constitution Avenue, N.W., is open Monday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. Admission is free. For general information, call (202) 737-4215; call the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176; or visit the National Gallery of Art's Web site at www.nga.gov. To receive the Gallery's free bimonthly Calendar of Events, call (202) 842-6662.

BACKGROUNDER

Carleton Watkins: An Eye for the West

Born in 1829 in Oneonta, New York, the son of an innkeeper, Carleton Watkins arrived in California around 1851. He learned how to photograph by chance when he filled in for an absent employee in a photography studio, and by 1860 he had a studio in a burgeoning San Francisco photography district. San Francisco was one of the most important photographic centers in the country during the second half of the nineteenth century, and Watkins made the city his home base for his entire photographic career. He was one of the founding members of the San Francisco Art Association in the 1870s, an organization that would later become the founding entity for the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

At the height of his career, Watkins was a leader in his field. His photographs were sought after by Ralph Waldo Emerson, helped convince Abraham Lincoln to sign the Yosemite Bill in 1864, were exhibited at the 1867 International Exposition in Paris, and were later seen by Napoleon III. His Yosemite Art Gallery, founded in 1871, was one of the most lavish and extensive photographic enterprises in the world. However, with increased competition and the economic crash of the mid-1870s, the tide of Watkins' financial fortunes turned. By the 1890s he was reduced to poverty and lived in a railroad boxcar with his family for eighteen months.

From the beginning of his career, Watkins was struck by the immensity of the California landscape, and he sought to render its expansive space and scale. To those outside California, reports of oversized Western natural resources seemed incredible; the colossal mountains, giant trees, and vast deserts defied belief. Watkins' photographs served as visual proof for the veracity of these claims; they also provided statistical measurements of the natural wonders to accompany the images. In order to convey expansive landscapes, Watkins utilized the panorama format, which enabled him to emphasize the sweep of the horizon line. Two of Watkins' photographic panoramas, which when framed measure up to eight feet in width, will be on view in the exhibition.

Watkins worked for over 30 years selling photographic prints and albums to scientists, investors, mining engineers, homesteaders, and tourists. Colonel John Fremont, the explorer who mapped the west with his friend Kit Carson, enlisted Watkins to photograph his land and mines. It was his association with Fremont that first led Watkins to photograph Yosemite in the early 1860s, resulting in some of his most famous images. In 1867 the photographer traveled to Portland, Oregon, and up the Columbia River gorge, making several photographs that have since become icons of Western landscape photography. Through his childhood friend Collis Huntington, Watkins became the unofficial photographer for the Central Pacific and Southern Railroads in the 1870s and 1880s and was allowed free travel along their lines. As he expanded the range of his activity in the 1880s, so too did he find new subjects to depict for a broadening audience of tourists.

The radical way Watkins viewed the landscape derives in part from his lifelong association with the railroad; the towns and industries that arose in the West along its right-of-way became a persistent subject in his later career. The railroad made a new kind of landscape as it penetrated the continent, and Watkins aligned his photography with the changing perceptions the train brought about.

###

* Adapted from press materials produced by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Washington, D.C.

BACKGROUND

Stereo Views: The Nineteenth Century Meets the Twenty-First Century*

Stereographs were extremely popular in the nineteenth century. They consisted of two near-identical photographs of the same scene, which when seen through a binocular viewer called a stereoscope, created an illusion of startling three-dimensional depth. By the 1850s, stereo views were a widespread and inexpensive mass-marketed form of entertainment: a stereo viewer and basket of cards were to be found in every proper Victorian parlor. Watkins made more photographs in stereo than in any other format, inventing imagery that made spectacular use of its three-dimensional effects.

In the exhibition, Carleton Watkins: The Art of Perception, twenty-first century innovations have been used to bring nineteenth-century images to the museum audience. Original stereo cards are displayed, and to optimize viewing conditions for these works six computer viewing stations are installed in a separate room at the end of the exhibiton. Utilizing cutting-edge technologies—designed specifically for the exhibition tour—to stimulate the stereoscopic effect, the viewing stations provide access to approximately 200 stereo views by Watkins, organized by year, subject matter, and region. Using special eyeglasses with LC (liquid crystal) lenses that synchronize with the computer via a transmitter, the museum visitor sees the selected images in three dimensions. The software interface for this unusual presentation was designed by the multimedia firm Perimetre Design, using stereo-imaging technology developed by StereoGraphics, creators of the stereo-viewing system for Mars Pathfinder.

###

* Adapted from press materials produced by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.