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TIMOTHY H. O'SULLIVAN'S RARE AND INFLUENTIAL IMAGES OF THE AMERICAN WEST
ON VIEW AT THE ART INSTITUTE

Timothy H. O'Sullivan: The King Survey Photographs

Premieres in Chicago October 22, 2011, through January 15, 2012

Exhibition Organized by the Nelson-Atkins Museum

Geologist and mountaineer Clarence King's survey of the American West (1867–1872) covered a vast 800-mile-long swath of terrain from the border of California eastward to the edge of the Great Plains. It was the first U.S. government-organized expedition to include a full-time photographer—**Timothy H. O'Sullivan** (1840–1882)—who produced about 450 iconic images of what was then a little-understood territory. More than 70 of these original prints



are now presented together for the first time in ***Timothy H. O'Sullivan: The King Survey Photographs***—an exhibition organized by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and premiering at the Art Institute of Chicago. On view from **October 22, 2011, through January 22, 2012**, in the museum's **Photography Galleries 1 and 2**, the exhibition takes an in-depth look at this one particular facet of O'Sullivan's accomplished career and promotes a larger understanding of the nature of his vision and of the context in which he worked. Detailed expedition maps, original survey volumes, and stereographs enhance the Chicago presentation of Sullivan's varied landscape photographs.

Timothy H. O'Sullivan grew up in an Irish-American family in New York City during the mid-1800s. He picked up photography as a teenager and was trained in Mathew Brady's studio before joining Alexander Gardner's firm. O'Sullivan's first major assignment was documenting the American Civil War: he contributed 44 pictures to *Gardner's Photographic Sketchbook of the War*, including a photograph titled *The Harvest of Death* that depicted the gruesome aftermath of the Battle of Gettysburg. Proving to be a skilled and imaginative photographer, O'Sullivan learned how to work quickly under difficult conditions—an asset that eventually won him a job on the government-commissioned United States Geological Exploration of the Fortieth Parallel led by Clarence King. After the success of the King Survey, O'Sullivan joined expeditions on the Isthmus of Panama and along the 100th meridian between 1870 and 1874. He spent the last years of his short life in Washington, DC as an official photographer for the U.S. Geological Survey and the Treasury Department. O'Sullivan died in Staten Island of tuberculosis at age 42.

The first of the great post-Civil War expeditions into the American West, the King Survey was funded by the federal government and organized under the authority of the U.S. Army Topographical Engineers. Between 1867 and 1872, Clarence King and his party of topographers, botanists, and zoologists explored and studied the habitat and way of life in the present-day states of Nevada, Utah, Colorado, and Wyoming. It was an area of enormous interest at the time, as it encompassed the path of the soon-to-be-completed First Transcontinental Railroad. The King Survey team captured an array of images that collectively described the sojourn's findings, from geological and topographical maps to lithographs of botanical specimens, rock samples, and fossils; photography was thus in a complex dialogue with other graphic practices.

Timothy H. O'Sullivan's photographic contribution to the King Survey is perhaps the most noteworthy achievement of his career. His pictures merge scientific utility with aesthetic self-awareness and manage to balance the patriotic claims of Western expansionism with a critical realism of the region's harsh terrain and the difficulties of working there, whether as a miner or even a photographer. His work took form within the visual logic of the survey itself: a professional enterprise shaped by competing interests and skills and oriented toward a diverse audience of scientists, government officials, and an educated general public.

During his four seasons in the field with King's group, O'Sullivan produced about 450 finished photographs. These have become iconic in the history of 19th-century Western and expeditionary photography, and have been the subject of debate about O'Sullivan's artistic or documentary

intentions. *Timothy H. O'Sullivan: The King Survey Photographs* not only showcases some of the rarest of the artist's Western photographs, but it also tells the story of his first experiences in this strange and forbidding landscape. O'Sullivan's work continues to challenge viewers with its clues to 19th-century cultural expectations and the construction of photographic history.

Timothy H. O'Sullivan: The King Survey Photographs is accompanied by a handsome 260-page catalogue, published by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and distributed by Yale University Press. The book features essays by exhibition curators Keith Davis and Jane Aspinwall; with contributions by Francois Brunet, John Herron, and Mark Klett; with the director's foreword by Julian Zugazagoitia. The volume also includes a catalogue raisonné of O'Sullivan's King Survey work: all the large-format photographs we have been able to identify on official or vintage mounts, from the iconic to the previously unknown. A richer understanding of O'Sullivan's work can be gleaned only through study of the maximum number of available photographs. The catalogue can be purchased for \$65 in the Art Institute's Museum Shop beginning October 31, 2011.

Timothy H. O'Sullivan: The King Survey Photographs is generously supported by the Smart Family Foundation. The exhibition is organized by the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art and is curated by Keith Davis, senior curator of photography, and Jane Aspinwall, assistant curator of photography, both at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. In Chicago, the exhibition is curated by Elizabeth Siegel, associate curator of photography at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Timothy H. O'Sullivan: The King Survey Photographs premieres at the Art Institute of Chicago before traveling to the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, in spring 2012.

IMAGE: Timothy H. O'Sullivan. *Pyramid Lake*, c. 1867–69. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Hallmark Cards, Inc.

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10:30 am–5:00 pm Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday

10:30 am–8:00 pm Thursday

10:30 am–5:00 pm Saturday, Sunday

Museum free to Illinois residents on first and second Wednesdays of every month.

Closed Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day, and New Year's Day.

ADMISSION

Adults \$18.00 Includes all special exhibitions

Children 14 and over, students, and seniors \$12.00 Includes all special exhibitions

Chicago residents receive a \$2.00 discount with proof of residency

Children under 14 always free

Members always free

City of Chicago residents with Chicago Public Library cards can borrow a "Museum Passport" card from any library branch for free general admission to the nine members of Museums in the Park, including the Art Institute of Chicago.