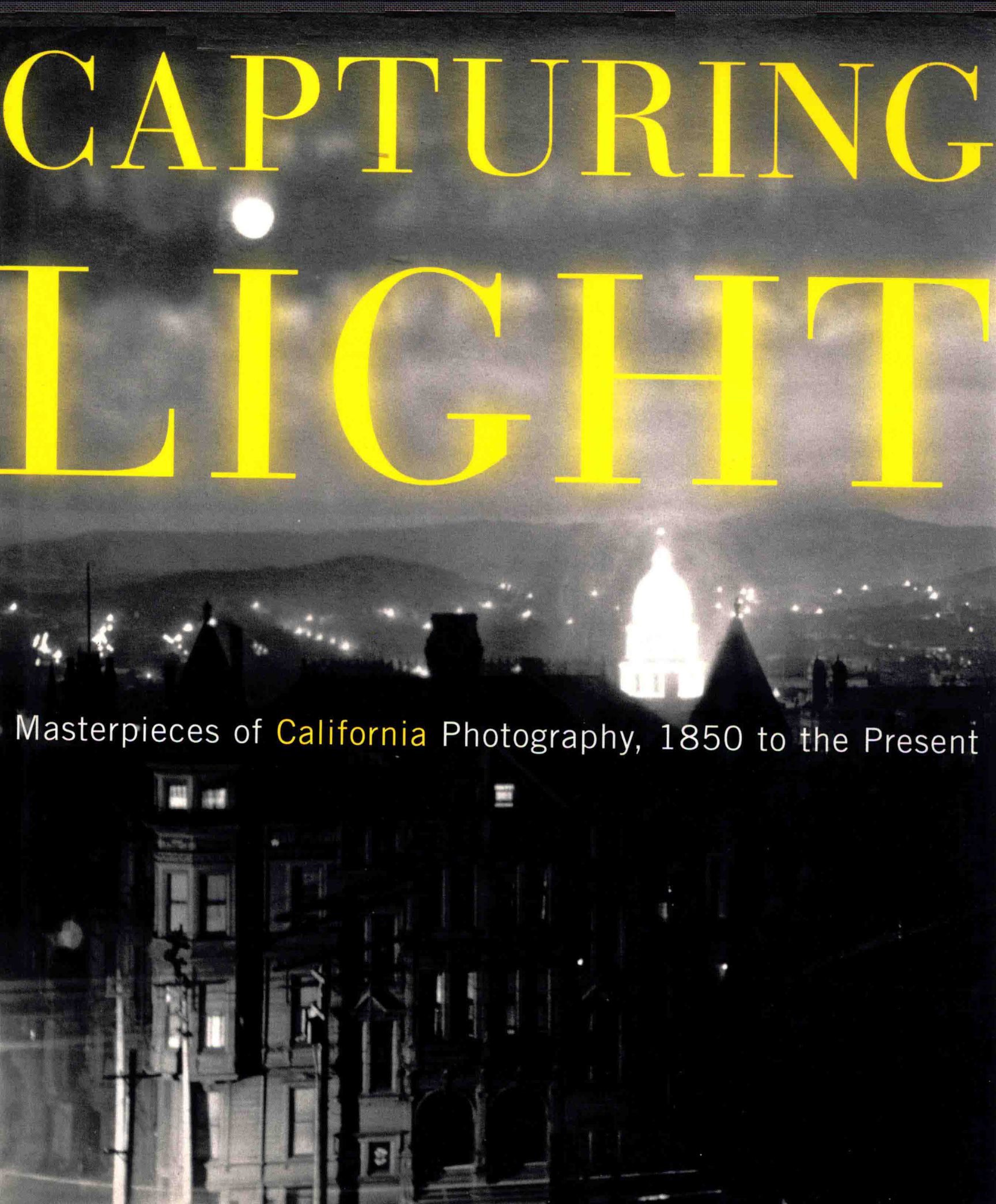


CAPTURING LIGHT

A black and white photograph of a city at night. In the background, a large, brightly lit dome, likely a state capitol building, stands out against a dark sky. The foreground shows a street scene with several multi-story buildings, some with lit windows. The overall atmosphere is dark and atmospheric, with the light from the dome and streetlights creating a strong contrast.

Masterpieces of **California** Photography, 1850 to the Present

Capturing Light

Masterpieces of
California Photography
1850 to the Present

EDITED BY

Drew Heath Johnson

FOREWORD BY

Therese Thau Heyman

ESSAYS BY

Peter E. Palmquist

Naomi Rosenblum

Sally Stein

Andy Grundberg

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE
OAKLAND MUSEUM OF CALIFORNIA

OAKLAND MUSEUM *of* CALIFORNIA
OAKLAND

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FRONTISPIECE:

Eadweard Muybridge, *Falls of the Yosemite, from Glacier Rock*, 1872.

Mammoth plate albumen print, 21½ x 16¾ in. Gift of Robert B. Honeyman, Jr.

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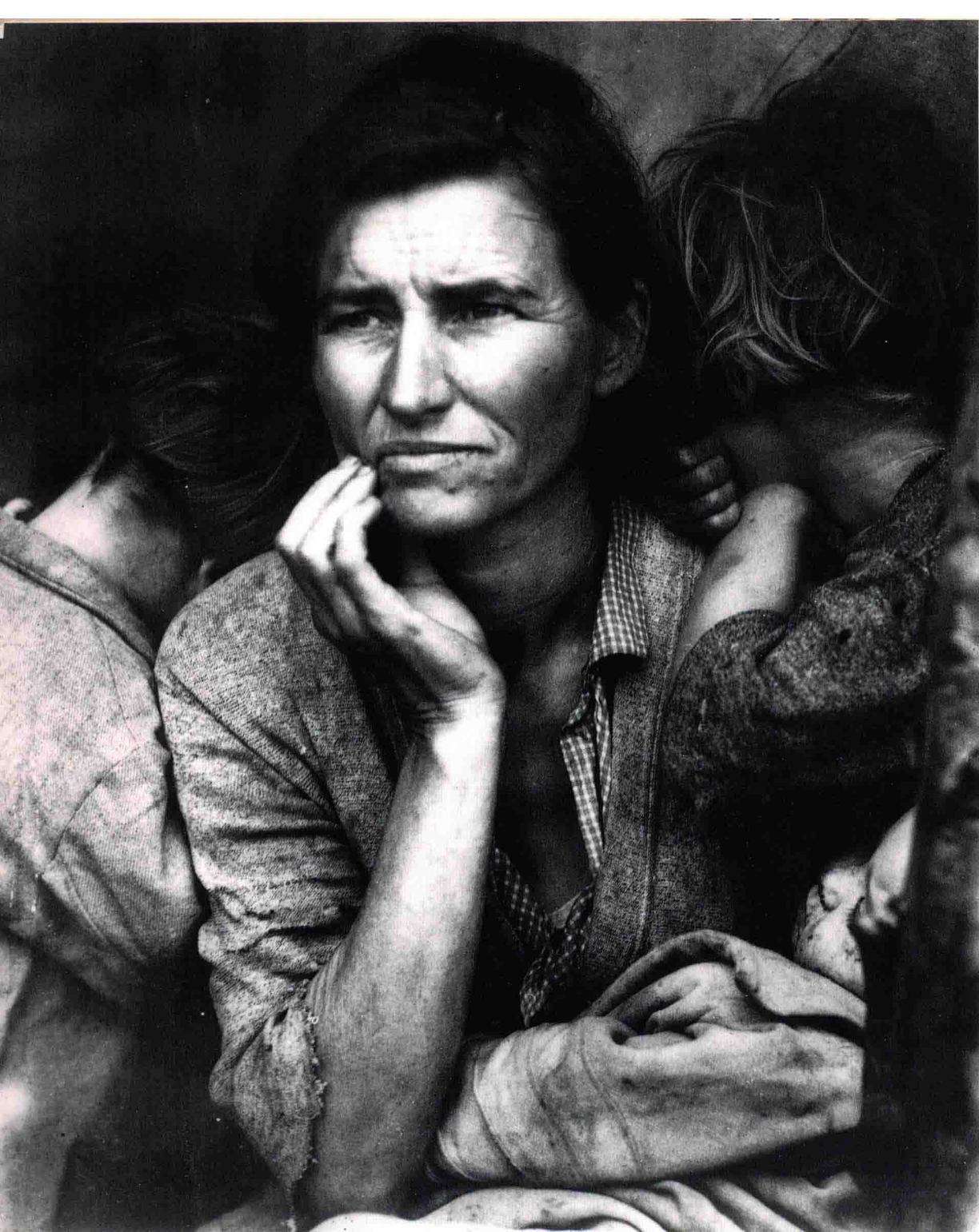
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DOROTHEA LANGE
Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936
COLLECTION OF THE OAKLAND MUSEUM OF
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FOREWORD

GOOD FORTUNE AND PHOTOGRAPHY have been joined in California from the beginning. As news of the gold discovery of 1848 spread, as “the world rushed in,” the hunger for information and news became insatiable. Headlines screamed and letters from the mines confirmed that riches could be had for the picking. The excitement generated by the remarkable discovery at Captain Sutter’s sawmill instantly inspired images—drawings, maps, cartoons—which were distributed to the eager and ignorant around the world. In 1849 thousands of voyagers set out for California’s gold fields.

Fortunately, this massive migration was witnessed and recorded by the newest visual invention. The daguerreotype had amazed the French when it was announced in 1839, and the process was quickly taken up by Samuel F. B. Morse and others in America. When gold was discovered, photographers were ready to drop everything for the chance to document history in the making, shipping cameras and copper plates “around the Horn” to California even as aspiring miners carried their shovels and pans on the arduous journey to El Dorado.

Photographers prospered as the ranks of forty-niners increased, yet the fragile copper and glass plates, once very numerous, are now maddeningly rare. For thirty years the Oakland Museum of California has collected, displayed and published its collection of fine, cased images depicting the lives of miners and the instant metropolis of San Francisco, the most photographed city of its day. Within a decade of the gold discovery, photographers were trooping to the Sierras, replacing pioneering images of human activity with majestic scenes of vast western mountains. Carleton Watkins, well represented in the Museum’s collection, made portfolios of Yosemite and other Western wonders for rich patrons and the general public alike.

This new western landscape demanded large-format photographs. The steady invention of new photographic methods and equipment made it possible for artists such as Watkins to capture the “best general view.” Human enterprise continued to be celebrated as well. The push to build a cross-country railroad provided opportunities and challenges for Andrew J. Russell and Alfred A. Hart. Russell’s large collection of glass-plate negatives documenting construction of the Union Pacific Railroad form the best-known holding of the Oakland Museum of California History Department.

As brilliantly as these early photographs pictured the terrain, its mineral deposits and landscapes, they also raised questions. The place of photography, its very nature, was always in dispute. Was the camera merely a machine that recorded light? Or could the light that was captured also reveal elements of art? This set of choices motivated a few museums, including the Oakland Art Museum, precursor of the Oakland Museum of California, to take up photography shows in the early 1930s. In the twentieth century the Pictorialists, and later the influential Group f.64, consciously declared in favor of photography as an art by creating carefully made prints designed for exhibition. Whether characterized by color pigments and inky use of light, as in the first group, or by clear, sharply seen

objects, as in the second, these photographers left no doubt as to their identity as artists. Many of the best California images from these groups remain in the collection at Oakland.

When I began adding to the small number of photographs in the Museum's Art Department in the 1960s, the strength of the holdings was contained in a few important gifts made by dedicated donors. I quickly found the family of Anne Brigman, a Pictorialist and member of Alfred Stieglitz's Photo-Secession, who made all of her significant images available, along with a set of fascinating personal letters and notes. Ansel Adams endorsed the idea of the collection's California focus with key gifts of early images from the 1930s. Willard Van Dyke, another influential member of Group f.64, sold us prized pictures from the group, as well as his own exhibition prints. Simply by searching phone books, I found that many of the originators of West Coast photographic styles still lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. It was our good fortune that they, too, encouraged our emphasis on photography as a major collection area. Oscar Maurer, Francis Bruguière (through his estate), Peter Stackpole and the rebellious Imogen Cunningham, all one-time Pictorialists, and Sonya Noskowiak among many others, made it possible to represent them with important work, from early vintage prints to family snapshots.

Most significant, Dorothea Lange and her husband Paul Taylor's remarkable gift of Lange's archive, containing negatives, signed prints, letters, books and tapes, gave great distinction to the Museum. Even the family of Florence Thompson, Lange's *Migrant Mother*, added their insights in the form of reminiscences describing their role in photographic history.

As the Oakland Museum prepared to open in its new building in 1969, donors Shirley Burden, Stanley Truman and Dr. and Mrs. Dudley P. Bell made it possible for me to make very significant purchases for the collection. I often found important work at auctions: out-of-fashion California landscapes, portraits by Arnold Genthe and Margrethe Mather, timed motion studies by Eadweard Muybridge, portfolios by Edward Curtis and George Fiske. Although it is hard to imagine today, photography was the bargain of the art world. Five hundred dollars could win Man Ray's California Images. Early vintage prints by Edward Weston, Mather and Cunningham, often platinum prints, were sold for no more than what a single lunch might cost today. Younger photographers such as Robert Dawson, Anthony Hernandez and Richard Misrach, just beginning to receive recognition, also aided our search for the best in California photography, donating work or making it available at a fraction of its present-day value.

Today Drew Johnson, who has headed the Art Department's photography section since 1995, successfully continues acquiring what is significant in the new market for photography, no longer the low-cost medium it was when I was fortunate to have been building the basic collection.

Therese Thau Heyman
Curator Emeritus and Research Curator
 OAKLAND MUSEUM of CALIFORNIA

INTRODUCTION & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Everything worth photographing is in California.

— EDWARD WESTON

PHOTOGRAPHY CAME TO CALIFORNIA in the midst of an international mass hysteria, known today as the Gold Rush of 1849. In an unlikely historical coincidence, news of vast amounts of gold in Sierran foothills reached the East Coast of America just as the infant art of photography was approaching maturity.¹ Loosed on the world in 1839, the daguerreotype initially was little more than a primitive, if startling, curiosity. Daguerre himself had declared photographic portraiture a practical impossibility, thanks to exposure times of twenty minutes or more. Just a decade later, on the eve of the Gold Rush, photographs were a commonplace feature of American life, with hundreds of professional photographers producing untold numbers of inexpensive and technically accomplished images. Like the countless multitude of bakers and schoolteachers seduced by tales of gold, these daguerreotypists were ready to drop everything for the romance and fortune contained in the word *California*.

It now seems appropriate, given the way we think of California, that photography should arrive in the region at a time of such national lunacy. Gold Rush California was a notoriously peculiar place, free from traditional social restraints, a multicultural jumble where ordinary moral, religious and sexual standards were more or less ignored. “You cannot know the perfect freedom and independence that characterizes all our relationships,” wrote a San Franciscan in 1852. “Society if it exists at all is freed from the multitude of prejudices and embarrassments and exactions that control the Eastern cities.”² There is more than a little resemblance between this statement and the words of Edward Weston who, a century later, found California “unhampered by tradition, less bound by convention, more open, free, youthful,—physically and psychically, [affording] untilled soil from which will appear a new feeling for, and manifestation of, life.”³

What makes California photography Californian? Aside from the obvious quality of having been made within the state’s borders, can there possibly be common threads which unite the photography of, say, Eadweard Muybridge and Judy Dater? There is the landscape, certainly, a feature so remarkable to nineteenth-century eyes that photography was initially required just to verify the outlandishness of the descriptions. The phrase “California photography” immediately calls up visions of Yosemite and Point Lobos, and it does not require too great an insight to see a link between the work of Carleton Watkins in the nineteenth century and Richard Misrach in the late twentieth.

Then there is the unique social milieu which so intrigued Weston, the freedom to ignore or revise artistic canons from without. This quality has been reinforced by a series of events (each in turn described as “second Gold Rushes”) which brought new people and new cultural influences to the state: The rise of the film industry and Hollywood culture, the economic boom brought about by World War II, waves of immigration from Asia, Latin America and the South, the youth revolution of the sixties, the rise of Silicon Valley. Each has changed the state permanently, yet each seemed somehow wholly consistent with what had gone before.

These two threads, the inspiration provided by California’s landscape and a quest for personal freedom, are perfectly embodied in the person of Anne Brigman (plates 51 and 52). “My pictures tell of my freedom of soul,” she declared, “of my emancipation from fear.” Camping in the high Sierras in the first decade of the twentieth century, Brigman experienced an epiphany: “One day during the gathering of a thunder storm when the air was hot and still and a strange yellow light was over everything, something happened almost too deep for me to be able to relate . . . I turned full force to the medium at hand and the beloved Thing [camera] gave to me a power and abandon that I could not have had otherwise.”⁴ The only West Coast photographer anointed a fellow of Alfred Stieglitz’s prestigious Photo Secession, Brigman went on to serve as role model and mother figure to a younger generation of California camera artists.

Much of what we think of as Great American Photography can be claimed as Californian. Names such as Weston, Watkins, Ansel Adams or Dorothea Lange are among the first that occur to us when we consider the history of the medium worldwide. In spite of this prominence, however, California photographers have historically felt isolated, removed from the mainstream and overlooked by East Coast arbiters such as Stieglitz. Those who break through this isolation cease to be regarded as California photographers. This may have as much to do with geography as the prejudice of Eastern critics. As more than one essayist here points out, the state was not often at the forefront of aesthetic trends, in photography or the other arts. But California artists unquestionably have shown unusual flexibility in adapting East Coast and European ideas, bending them in new directions, exploring new techniques and theories in fresh, innovative ways. Beyond this, generalizations about California photography become increasingly glib. The subject is simply too big, the work too varied.

This book does not pretend to present a comprehensive history of photography in California. It is, more than anything, a survey of a single collection. For nearly forty years the Oakland Museum of California has collected the work of California photographers, both celebrated and obscure. Much of the collection’s strength derives from the Museum’s unique fusion of three earlier institutions into a single building encompassing the art, history and environment of the state. Because all three disciplines within the Museum collect and display photographs, an unusually broad representation of the medium has emerged. Fine art, documentary, commercial, vernacular and scientific photography are all present, amounting to more than a million images in total. The result is certainly the most

distinguished and extensive collection of photographic imagery relating to California anywhere.

Presenting a comprehensive survey of such a vast collection, so varied in time, technique and style is probably impossible. There is, first of all, the thorny question of which photographers to include. One of the great pleasures of working with the collection over the past ten years has been the discovery of unknown or forgotten masterpieces by artists whose names are not yet common currency, even among experts. In the following pages you will find familiar icons next to works which appear startlingly new, even though they may have been made a century ago. Having settled on the artists, there is the problem of summarizing each person's career in one or two images. Some photographers are able to make single pictures which seem to encapsulate their entire output; others can only be understood in series. These latter must be given context, using interpretive material of the sort found in the biographies and notes to the plates.

Then there is the matter of the curator's vision, or less charitably, the curator's taste. Among other tasks, museums seek to present historically balanced interpretations of their collections. That said, the selection and sequencing of artworks for an exhibition or book is unavoidably subjective, undeniably personal. This is particularly true in regard to recent work which has yet to pass through the filter of time, and about which there is little consensus. Let me state clearly: Although I have employed every effort to choose photographs based on their importance to the history of the medium, the selection is, at bottom, governed by my own eye. Another editor could have produced a completely different, but no less valid, book from the same collection.

Inevitably, there are painful omissions. California imagery by well-known photographers not usually associated with the state (Diane Arbus or Alvin Langdon Coburn, for example) have been passed over in favor of those who built careers here. Snapshots, advertising and other "vernacular" photography are largely overlooked in favor of "fine art" photography (a problematic phrase at the turn of the twenty-first century), whose primary goal is personal artistic expression. Hence the book's subtitle, "Masterpieces of California Photography," which unapologetically implies a "greatest hits" approach. Then there are the inevitable weak spots which occur in even the finest collection. I was grieved, for instance, to discover we lacked a good representation of work by Japanese-American Pictorialists. Whenever possible, we have attempted to remedy these omissions by the inclusion of work from other collections within the essays. Finally, the selection of images from the past twenty years, when so much work has been produced in such a bewildering variety of styles and media, has been more than usually difficult. Time alone will tell whether the choices made for this final section are valid, or whether we have overlooked the truly significant photography of late twentieth century California. Suffice to say that I am wholeheartedly enthusiastic about every photograph presented here; each has remained powerful during the process of editing and re-editing.

A word about the structure of the book: At the heart is a selection of two hundred color plates, arranged chronologically and interspersed with essays on California photography during the period

discussed. Because the plates reproduce vintage prints, each of which possesses a unique history, notes to the plates follow. These brief notes contain technical, contextual and anecdotal information, which will hopefully prove entertaining as well as illuminate the significance of each work. Biographies of each artist follow, accompanied, whenever possible, by portraits. It is our hope that the resulting catalog will help foster a new appreciation for California photography in addition to providing a brief survey of an important collection.

I would like to thank the staff of the Oakland Museum of California for support at every stage of this project. The book itself would not have been possible without a generous grant from the Oakland Museum Women's Board. Executive Director Dennis Power took an early and active interest, as did grant writer Jerry Daviee, whose appreciation for the photographs informed our fundraising efforts. Rich Edwards of our Board of Directors was a dynamo—his enthusiasm for the exhibition and for photography in general is truly energizing. Sandy Wolfe of the Women's Board and the Art Guild instantly understood the importance of presenting photography to the widest possible audience; her behind-the-scenes support has been valuable in too many ways to enumerate. Erin Garcia researched and wrote the notes to the plates and assisted tirelessly throughout all stages of the manuscript. Abby Wasserman was an astute and cheerful editor. Marcia Eymann and Diane Curry of the History Department provided unrestricted access to their department's photography collections. Claudia Kishler and Joy Walker offered friendship and support in their capacity as registrars, as did Bill McMorris.

Outside the Museum, many individuals provided expertise and support. Special thanks must go to our essayists, Peter Palmquist, Naomi Rosenblum, Sally Stein and Andy Grundberg. Besides contributing an essay, Peter Palmquist also wrote the artists' biographies and offered expert advice. He is a treasure. Designers Gordon and Suzanne Chun were asked to perform miracles under tight deadlines, as were John Hartz and the staff of Camera Corner, Oakland. Joan Murray contributed a large group of portraits from her *California Photographers* series, in the process donating a set of prints to the Museum. Mary Alinder helped with research questions, as did Taylor Horton of San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park. Robert Weil and Neil Giordano at W. W. Norton were patient beyond any reasonable expectation.

A number of institutions and individuals contributed photographs to the essays and biographies. Special thanks are due to Marianne Babal of Wells Fargo Bank Historical Services; Jacklyn Burns, the J. Paul Getty Museum; Jon Burris, the Brett Weston Archive; Shaula Coyl, Eve Schillo and Cheryle T. Robertson, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Susan Ehrens; The Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Susan Friedewald of the John Gutmann Trust; Susan Haas, the Society of California Pioneers; G. Ray Hawkins and the G. Ray Hawkins Gallery, Santa Monica; Debra Heimerdinger/Fine Art Photographs; George Hurrell, Jr. and Hurrell's Hollywood; The International Center of Photography; Deborah Irmas and the Mortensen Estate Collection; Steven Josefsberg; the Jan Kesner

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The late Henry Mayer first introduced me to our publisher and stimulated the editorial process during many fascinating discussions. At the time of his death, Henry had just completed research for a biography of Dorothea Lange. He is sorely missed.

M. Lee Fatherree, who produced the color transparencies for each of the plates, is in a class by himself. Lee is more than a craftsman; the care and precision he lavished on each image came from a deep involvement with and appreciation for the photographs.

Finally, special thanks must extend to Therese Heyman, Curator Emeritus of prints and photographs. The majority of images presented in this book were collected by Therese, starting in the mid-1960s. For three decades she acquired the best in California photography, often working against fashion and the prejudices of the market. Her instincts are impeccable and her choices have stood the test of time. Any distinction possessed by the collection is largely due to her efforts.

Drew Heath Johnson
Curator of Fine Art Photography
OAKLAND MUSEUM *of* CALIFORNIA

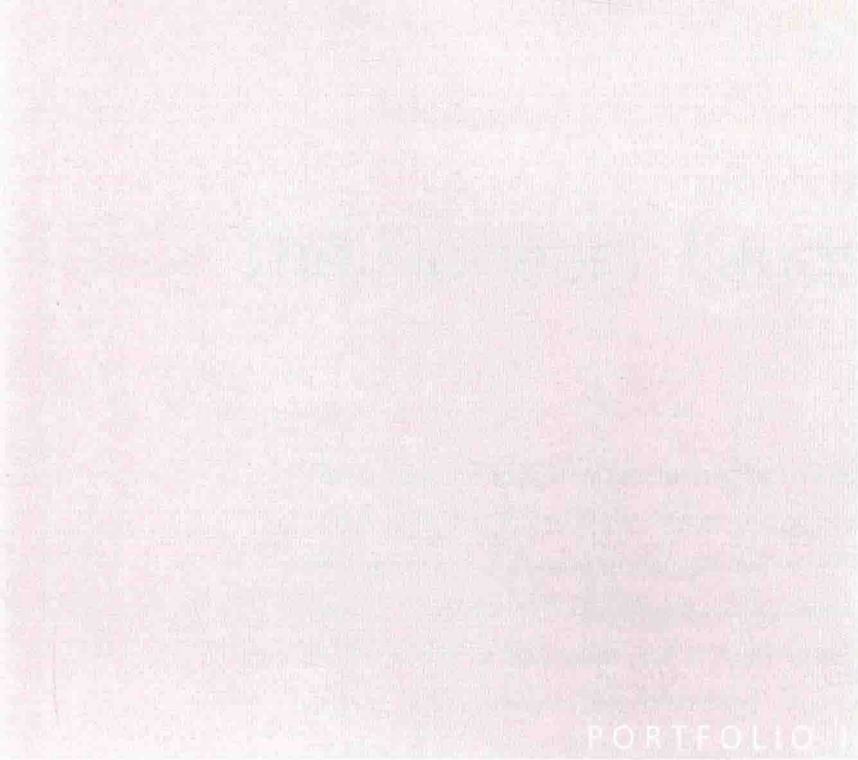
NOTES

1. There is evidence that at least one person made photographs in California prior to the Gold Rush, as Peter Palmquist relates in his essay which follows. Although the story of Epifania de Guadalupe Vallejo is intriguing, however, there is no corroborative proof of her experiments with daguerreotypy.
2. Quoted in Roger W. Lotchin, *San Francisco, 1846-1856: From Hamlet to City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 291-2.
3. Edward Weston, "America and Photography," quoted in Peter Bunnell, ed., *Edward Weston: On Photography* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., Peregrine Smith Books, 1983), 56.
4. Quoted in Therese Thau Heyman, *Anne Brigman: Pictorial Photographer/Pagan/Member of the Photo-Secession* (Oakland: The Oakland Museum, 1974), unpaginated introduction and page 3.

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1850 - 1900



PORTFOLIO I

The Pioneers

The Pioneers: Landscape and Studio

PETER E. PALMQUIST

The existence of California has, at length, become a 'great fact' [of] the day. For nearly two years Europe was stupefied with the strange exaggerations and contradictory tales which were received from the unknown and mysterious Dorado, but which she feared to believe. The doubt is, however, now solved . . . several of the localities have been daguerreotyped; and from a set of these views taken in the first month of the present year at San Francisco and Sacramento City, we have selected the originals of the accompanying illustrations. To refuse the evidence of the Daguerreotype is to deny the existence of the 'prime-cheerer' light, and the Sun and his works.

— LONDON ILLUSTRATED NEWS, October 19, 1850

CALIFORNIA'S PIONEER PHOTOGRAPHERS were a wonderfully diverse and colorful group of individuals.¹ One was a certifiable lunatic with delusions of grandeur who walked the streets of San Francisco dressed as George Washington. In addition to daguerreotypes, he offered his services as a “matrimonial promoter” and proposed an elaborate and prescient scheme to drive a railroad tunnel through the Sierra Nevada mountains so that unmarried women from the East Coast could be matched with California's lonely miners (figure 1).² Another pioneer daguerreian invented a rat poison and became an expert in Mayan culture; unfortunately, he is also reputed to have dynamited portions of ruins that impeded his archaeological investigations.³ Many early California photographers had simultaneous careers as midwives, journalists, sign painters, dentists, musicians or undertakers. Perhaps the most enterprising among them was the man who set up his camera at the entrance to San Francisco's largest cemetery in order to “preserve the likeness” of corpses before they were buried.⁴

In fact, two of the most famous names in nineteenth-century California photography lived lives which could serve as the basis for novels. Edward James Muggerridge was an egotistical self-promoter who immigrated from England, changed his name to Eadweard Muybridge and, at the height of his fame as a photographer, murdered his wife's lover in cold blood. After creating a superb body of work in California, Alaska and South America, he went on to become one of the inventors of the motion picture. Carleton Watkins, on the other hand, specialized in large-format landscape photographs. With almost no formal training, he rose to enjoy international recognition and, at the apex of a fifty-year career, established the largest gallery ever devoted to outdoor photography. Yet most of his professional life was spent in a state of financial despair, and in the end he not only lost his eye-

sight, but was abandoned by a much-younger wife who declined to care for him in his old age. He spent the final six years of his life in a mental institution, and lies buried in an unmarked grave. Perhaps most tragic, thousands of his precious landscape negatives were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906. Rediscovered in the late twentieth century, his large prints (which in his lifetime sold for \$3.50, including frame) are now considered priceless masterpieces.

What better time than the new millennium to review the role of photography in documenting the ideals of the California Dream?⁵ It is also a fitting moment to celebrate the accomplishments of the men and women who recorded the people, places and great events of California so long ago. Who among us would not relish an opportunity to step back in time to pay a visit to Gold Rush California? What was it like to drop in for a “likeness” at a San Francisco daguerreian studio operated by Coombs, Shew, or Vance? Photography was far more common in the nineteenth century than has previously been recognized. The sheer scale of photographic practice in California compels us to look beyond the big names, such as Watkins and Muybridge, to examine the careers of little-known image makers. It is their stories that reveal the place of photography in the lives of ordinary people, and its role in creating a visual iconography of California that would become recognized around the world.

Though the Gold Rush of 1849 dramatically focused the eyes of the world on California, the seeds of the California Dream had been sown much earlier. In 1625, for instance, English cartographer Henry Briggs published the first of many maps picturing California as an island, initiating the idea of California as a place apart, quintessentially different from mainland America. As late as the



FIGURE 1.
Frederick Coombs
Untitled (Self Portrait), c. 1865
Albumen carte de visite
COURTESY OF PETER E. PALMQUIST