

We look at photographs differently from the way we see other pictures. For a variety of historical and perceptual reasons our culture ordinarily assumes a special relationship between the photograph and the external, physical world. We don't do that with a painting.

A picture-maker lives in the world, and is both a product of that world and an observer who perceives and interprets it in his or her own way. The picture is an attempt to clarify that experience by producing a symbol.

A painting, or some other obvious product of a human hand, we treat as only the first in a whole series of semi-transparent screens between the audience and, deep at the end of a long tunnel, the "subject." We get the sense that, between the screen-like surface of the painting and that final, solid wall of meaning, we can discern layer upon layer of additional, receding scrims of social schemata and the artist's perceptual, interpretive, intuitive, and technical decisions.

Seeing the typical photograph, on the other hand, is more like seeing a sheet of clear glass: what is most apparent is



Cactus (self-portrait)

REFLECTIONS OF *LUCIUS JARVIS*

Only by looking at a photograph obliquely will we see a reflection of its maker.



Parlor of the Jarvis Studio



Iowa Picnic, 1888

the subject just "beyond" the surface of the image. Only by looking at a photograph obliquely will we see a reflection of its maker; but the temptation is to rush blithely toward its most obvious sensual allurements.

One goal of the California Museum of Photography is to examine photographs, not only to reach an understanding of what is stated and implied as "subject matter," but also to see the reflections which can tell us why this subject has been presented to us, what it meant to the individual who produced it and the culture which used it, and what it can mean to us now. With a photograph by so famous and self-consciously artistic a photographer as, for example, Edward Weston, we can look for clues and theories in the reams of critical/historical work which has already been published. But what of pictures which are valued—if they are valued at all—largely for the glimpse they provide of

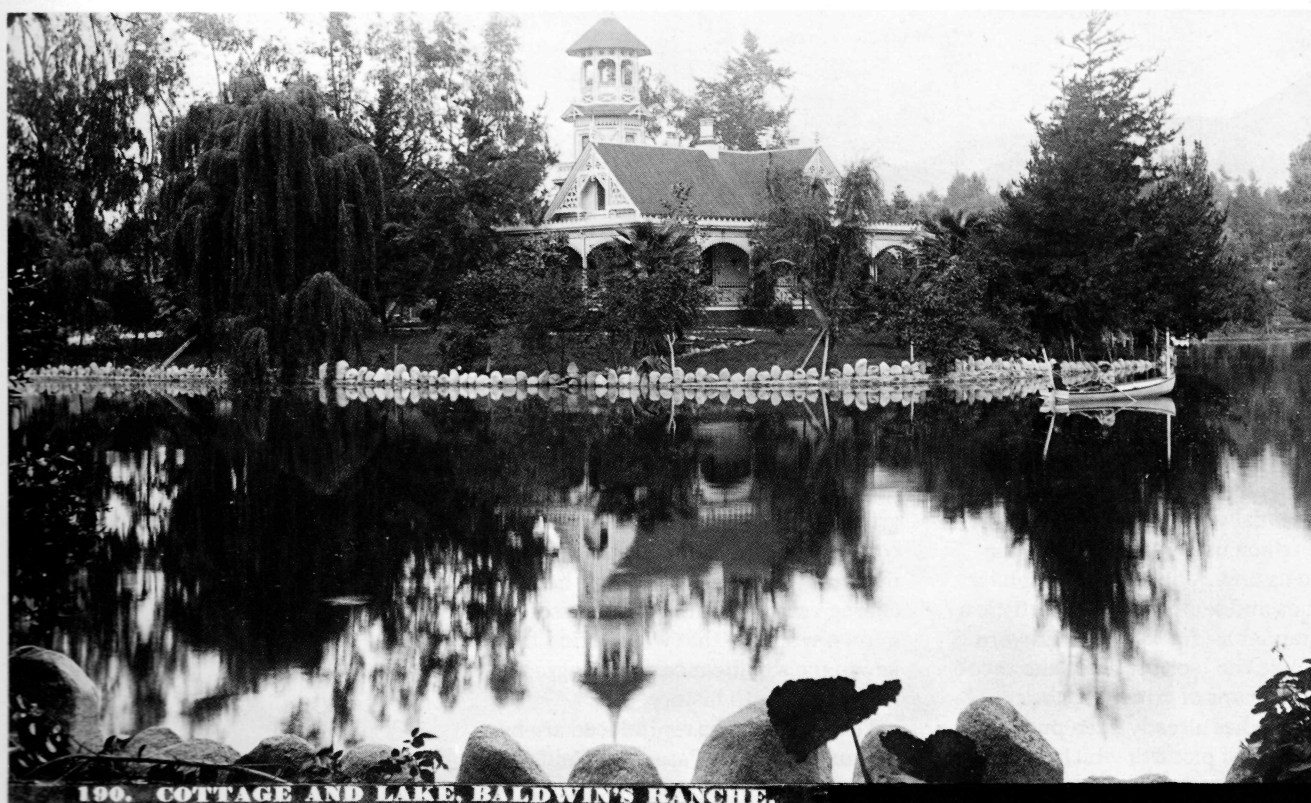
some bygone era or long-dead personality? Those hundreds of thousands of images (for lack of a better term, we usually call them "historical photographs") which tell us—if we can believe their captions—what the old schoolhouse looked like, or where the visiting dignitary stood?

The CMP collects and preserves thousands of pictures by the great masters of photography's history and current practice. But it also takes a deep interest in the work produced by myriad photographers who are better described as competent, conscientious recorders of the world and its changes. It is here, among vernacular images by lesser-known workers, that we will find the key to the significance of photography's interaction with history.

The photographs reproduced are by Lucius E. Jarvis, a Pasadena, California, photographer who ran a prosperous studio from late in 1886 until about 1894.



185 Floral Scene at Residence of C. B. Adams, Alhambra, Cal.



190. COTTAGE AND LAKE, BALDWIN'S RANCHE.

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B 42. ORANGE PICKING & PACKING.

They have been selected (from a total of 77 in the collection) to represent the range of Jarvis's activities as a photographer. In them, we see reflections of the 1890s Southern California land boom; the influence of Iowa "transplants" to the Pasadena area; a typical, late nineteenth-century, small town photography business. We can infer the newcomers' fascination with desert flora; share their voyeuristic urge to catch glimpses of how the "other half" lives; and even smile at the occasional example of wry Victorian wit.

Though substantial numbers of Jarvis photographs exist in the collections of the Pasadena Historical Society and the California State Historical Society, those institutions follow the time-honored system of filing historic pictorial materials according to the topic, or subject, of the image. By segregating pictures according to their maker, the CMP can more easily relate biographical details

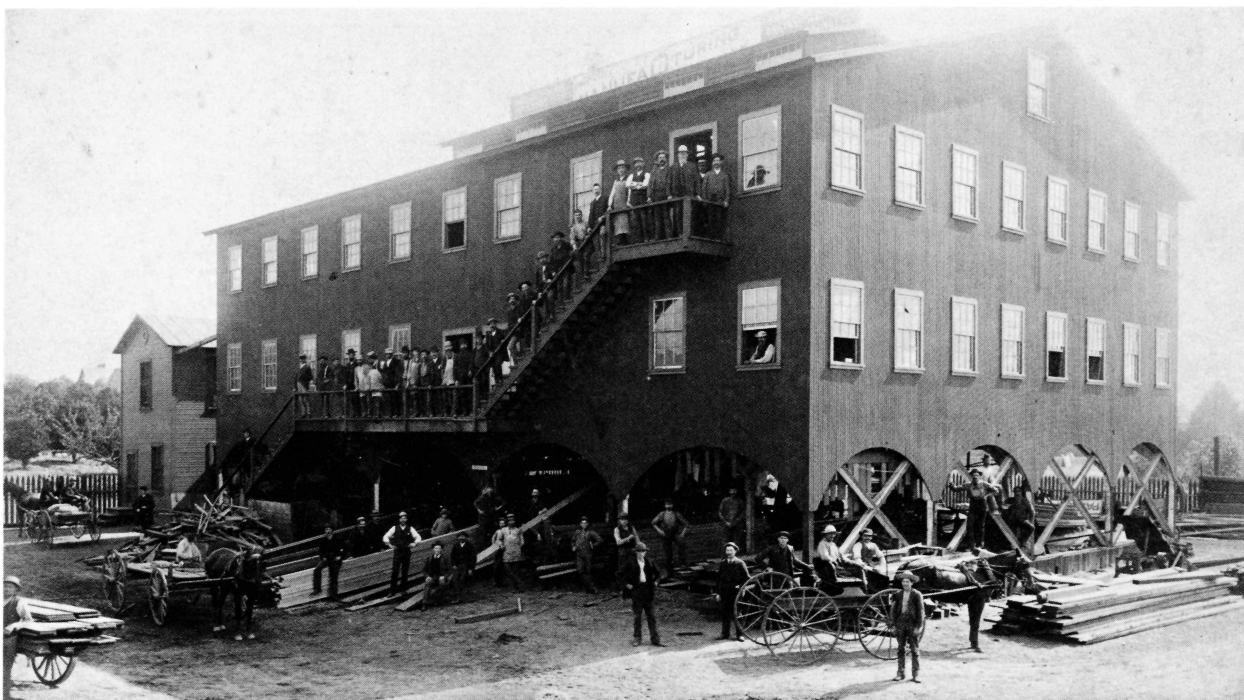
to groups of images. Knowing the years when Jarvis's studio operated, for instance, can help us date the pictures.

We also know that he grew up in Marshalltown, Iowa (he was born there on October 9, 1865, and came to Pasadena at age 21). So the seeming preponderance of group portraits taken at Iowa and Illinois reunion picnics probably were made because Jarvis and his father, Benjamin (who also worked with the studio), personally knew the participants. As we watch the size of the picnic groups grow, year by year, we realize that these Iowans shared a strong identification with their former home. This identity was the basis for social interaction, and in all likelihood accounted for a large share of Jarvis's sales.

Jarvis was a commercial photographer. Much of his work would have been done for individual customers on commission (this would include portraits, especially, but also such scenes as

the completion of a new industrial building). The remainder of his work consisted of views with imprinted titles that were intended for broader distribution—pictures of local landmarks and events which could be printed and sold in relatively large numbers. The question of who bought such "published" views is an interesting one. While a pretty image of a local formal garden might make a nice home decoration, it's doubtful that so vulgar a subject as a field strewn with dead rabbits would have been used in the same way.

More likely, the people of this era collected and saved such souvenirs to record the myth they were creating of Western Life. A few scant miles from Jarvis's studio, Charles Lummis would build his river boulder "pioneer" mansion, taking evenings off to discuss photography and Indian ethnology with a fellow amateur who ran a bookstore in town: Adam Clark Vroman. Later on,



Pasadena Manufacturing Company

Southern California immigrant Zane Grey would codify the myth, while an infant film industry, headquartered down the road in Hollywood, would flesh it out.

Jarvis surely was oblivious to the romantic chord he struck with *Rabbit Drive*, and pictures of muleback excursions up Mount Wilson and of gigantic, primitive cacti. He displayed and sold them alongside testimonials to Southern California sophistication—photographs of grand hotels, rose-bedecked cottages, and a burgeoning agricultural industry. His customers packaged them all up together, and sent these bundles as ambiguous, mysterious messages home to the frozen plains of Iowa.

Jarvis had a very short career as a photographer, advancing to social prominence in a paint and wallpaper business, as a stationer, and finally as a banker. By the time of his death on December 7, 1943, he had served as a director of the local Chamber of Com-

merce and an active member of the Masons, the Rotary Club, the Merchants Association, and the First Congregational Church. That he could have earned the same esteem by continuing his eight-year stint as a photographer is doubtful. Early photographers were thought of as shadowy alchemists; later workers lost the best of their business to the amateur camera, which swept the public imagination like wildfire from the 1890s onward.

Jarvis was a dependable, predictable nineteenth-century Citizen, who left a straight-forward picture of a simple time in an ordinary community. On close examination, however, that document may tell us things no other record could, because it is both fossil and relic—both a raw, natural substance and a piece of something human—depending on how we hold it to the light.

Charles Desmarais
Director



24—RABBIT DRIVE, DEER CREEK, CAL., 2,500 KILLED.

His customers sent these ambiguous, mysterious messages home to the frozen plains of Iowa.

The museum gratefully acknowledges research assistance on the CMP collection of Jarvis photographs provided by Paul Johnson and Priscilla Gray, both former UCR students, and Melissa Patton of the Pasadena Historical Society.