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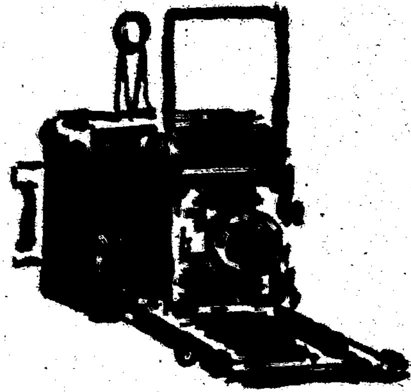

John Collier, Jr.

LAURA GILPIN: WESTERN PHOTOGRAPHER

A PORTRAIT of Laura Gilpin is an observation on the western heritage of the artist. The sum is far more than a regional background. It embraces the concept of man in nature that so completely differentiates the westerner from the easterner. The easterner's milieu is so often man against man, in contrast to the westerner's vision of man against the mountains, man finding his way across the vast plain, the personal challenge against wilderness, time, and space. This is the frontier that today still leaves the western thinker apart, a voice unto himself, in contrast to the eastern mind that moves with a group, a mind that is either in revolt against society or riding the wave with society.

This individual concept has brought riches to the westerner, but it also has handicapped him. While he still uses his own honest but primitive tools to forge out a creative image, the easterner has at his fingertips every known device to make the work of an artist easier and more efficient, even if the finished product is slick and unindividual. The westerner, the poet of the great spaces, must sift for images and words with as much lonesome prospecting as his ancestors did with pick and pan, whereas the easterner, through the social group, swiftly picks up ready-made language and proven concepts. So, in contrast to the westerner's isolation, the group impact becomes the easterner's prime handicap.

All these elements we find embodied in the forty years of Laura

Gilpin's graphic development. At the age of thirteen, at the St. Louis Exposition of 1903, Laura Gilpin started her career of photography, with a box camera. But Laura had to spend thirteen years growing up before the San Francisco Fair of 1916 completely absorbed her in photography. This fair that decided her career was an impact of great structures, broad avenues, and gigantic material achievements. Such an abstraction of the social dimension was not unusual among her western contemporaries. William Henry Jackson, who witnessed the opening of the West, took relatively few photographs of people as compared to his vast file of mountains, natural wonders, and man's achievement in the form of railroad bridges. Many years later he remarked with some regret that he had traveled through the Navajo country and made no study of the Indians: "My goal was mineral resources and cliff dwellings."

Documentation of physical geography is the function of the explorer, the man who measures himself by great seas and mountains. Documentation of society is primarily the expression of the revolutionary, the man who has become oppressed by a crowded economy. The heritage of the West is the great migration *away* from the congested East. "Go west, young man!" turned youth from a revolutionary to an explorer.

Mathew Brady, Lincoln's camera man, who was of Jackson's century, was one of the first photographers to record bluntly human life as he found it. But Brady was an easterner who never left the East and who established his form in the heat of battle. There is little doubt that Brady had an articulate social awareness, and his Civil War records, taken ten years before Jackson began his career and many decades before Gilpin, caught a grim and revealing reaction to war, comparable to the etchings of Goya.

The technical development of photography had little to do with this phenomenon. Brady's materials were inferior to those of Jackson, and Gilpin's materials have been from the start infinitely superior to Jackson's. But Laura Gilpin today still prefers

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to make all her photographs with the traditional view camera, regardless of the modern equipment that has been developed to make human documentation almost automatic.

Laura Gilpin grew up in the west. Her father came to Colorado from Baltimore in 1882 and bought a cattle ranch near Colorado Springs. In 1890 he married a girl from St. Louis and brought her to his Colorado ranch, where in 1891 Laura Gilpin was born. But in the cattle slump of the '90's the ranch was sold and Mr. Gilpin turned to mining, while the family lived in Colorado Springs. Laura's family did their best to rear her and her brother as proper eastern children. Laura spent all her school days in the society of "the Springs." Even in those days Colorado Springs was a resort, filled with eastern visitors and a few Europeans. But the mountains and the plains of Colorado were Laura's home. The outdoors and life in the saddle were far more intriguing than the tea parties of mining tycoons and visiting English sportsmen. When Laura was thirteen her family sent her east for four years to a girl's finishing school in Connecticut. Here she found Latin a perplexing chore, but she was good in math and much absorbed in physical geography and music and athletics.

After the San Francisco World's Fair that decided her career, Gilpin went East again. At the age of twenty-six, Laura enrolled at the famous Clarence White School of Photography in New York City. She buried herself in her studies and absorbed herself with New York. But Laura was a country girl, and she apparently missed the great social upheavals that inspired Lewis Hines and Jacob A. Riis to use photography to make their tremendous contributions toward social awareness. Hine with his records of the immigrants from Europe, and Riis with his epic documentation of the slums, changed the course of social welfare in the city of New York—and also the course of photography. These men were still working when Gilpin was in New York, but they had little influence on her career.

How could she have returned to the West without being influ-

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enced by Riis and Hine? Probably because they were not among the photographers who were popular in that day. Even though their work was known to many of her colleagues, no one recognized their work as an important development to follow. They were recognized more by sociologists than by artists and photographers, and it was not until many years later that these men influenced the course of photography.

Gilpin returned to the West with the pseudo-art conscious soft-focus technique that was the rage of the day, rather than the biting clear images of these two pioneers. Alone, without the stimulus and fellowship of a group, Laura Gilpin proceeded to throw out inferior techniques from her work. It is a tribute to her integrity that she was able to overcome crippling effects of the soft-focus lens entirely by her own determination. The need for accurate social record produced the sharp negative of Jacob Riis. It was the infinite western horizons that caused Gilpin to stop her soft-focus lens down to *f*:64 to obtain brilliant hairline definition.

This was only the initial step in throwing out the decadent influences of 1916. Photographers of that period were doing their best to imitate paintings, just as the painters of the same era were trying to imitate the amazing graphic honesty of the photograph. It has taken Gilpin thirty years of work to emerge from photo-painting to the honest photography of her work today, and it was the mountains of the west that drove her forward. Financial responsibilities forced Gilpin to work in this popular sentimental mode long after she was ready for a more realistic approach. Her photographs of people retained the sentimental posed form long after she was producing magnificent photographs of nature that stand alongside the work of Adams and Weston in their honesty and clarity.

Laura Gilpin's work can be classified in three periods, three published books. The dates of these volumes are amazingly close: 1941, 1948, and 1949. Yet they best sum up her thirty-odd years of development. For one of the interesting facts of Laura Gilpin's

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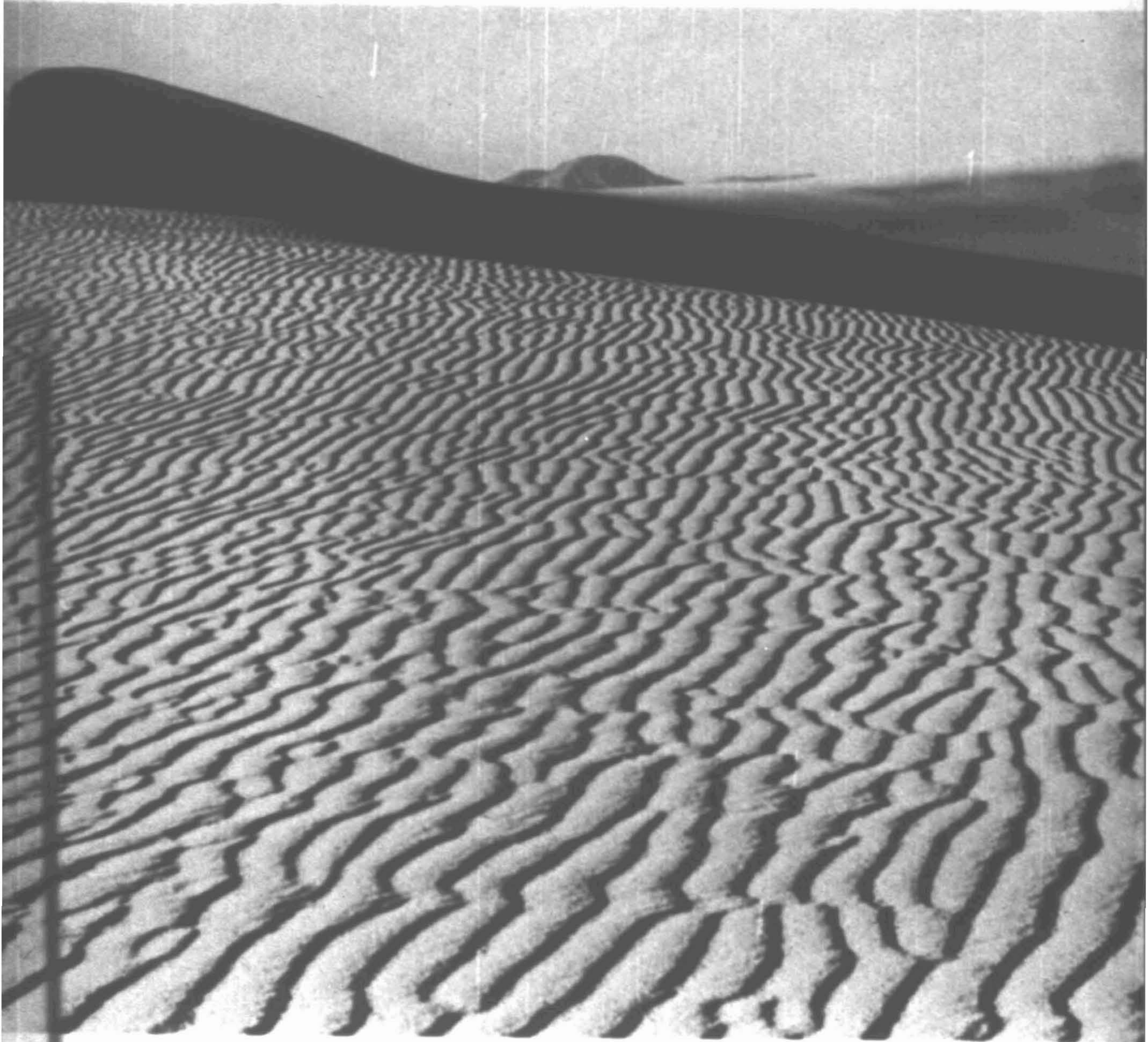
THE PROSPECTOR. 1940.



WHITE SANDS. 1945.

life is that her most vital development is taking place in her later fifties, and undoubtedly these books more than any other factor, have accelerated her development. Again it is self-examination rather than group influence that has developed her personality.

Laura Gilpin's first attempt to photograph people for an objective reason was around 1925 when she became interested in lantern slides of the Southwest. Through the winters Laura did routine commercial photography in Colorado Springs, and in the summers, on vacation field trips, she began assembling a slide file on the Pueblo culture of the Southwest. It was from the body of this material that her first book, *The Pueblos: A Camera Chronicle,* was made. Published by Hastings House in 1941, it was a modest volume designed as a tourist handbook to the archaeological wonders of New Mexico and Arizona.

Though the material for the Pueblo book was published more than twenty years after her studies in New York, it contained much of this early period—soft-focus photography and self-consciously posed models that made her scenes of Indian life appear more like museum sets than breathing human beings. Her approach to the Indians was through archaeology rather than sociology. This was not because Gilpin did not *feel* the Indian, but rather that the concepts and techniques for accurate social observation were not yet in her experience.

The Pueblo book was also Gilpin's first attempt to relate pictures in a significant continuity, rather than just "views" or romantic photo-painting. What the book did display was a thoroughness and seriousness of intent, and a genuine literary instinct toward the book medium. The pictures are accompanied by an exhaustively researched text that succeeded admirably in simplifying the highly involved subject of southwestern archaeology. The book was a financial success.

Between *The Pueblos* and her second book came the Second World War, and an experience that cut like a river through her life. She was "drafted" as the official photographer for the Boeing

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airplane factory in Kansas. This experience challenged her to tackle a completely new medium, industrial photography. This assignment carried her into some of the most vital defense work of the war, in the laboratory, on the ground, and in the air. The tremendous amount of material to be covered, the successive deadlines, the shortage of laboratory assistance, developed Gilpin's technical ability to the extreme and gave her the confidence to approach any problem regardless of size.

During the war years, the Pueblo book had made enough sales to encourage Hastings House to publish a second book by Laura Gilpin. In 1932 she had made a trip to the ruins of Chichén Itzá in Yucatán with an expedition from Colorado Springs. It was the negatives of this trip that convinced the publishers to put out *Temples in Yucatán: A Camera Chronicle of Chichén Itzá.* Gilpin made a second trip to Yucatán in 1946 to complete the material of the book. This project was a major undertaking and the first time Gilpin had the opportunity to gather material directly for a projected book.

The published work showed real growth. Technically the photographs were sharper, better composed, and more resourceful. The plates of the book are thrilling from their sheer photographic beauty. It was in this book that Gilpin truly defined her medium, photography. She had cast off every influence but that of light, the extreme possibilities of her lenses, and the flexibility of her negatives. One missed only a more comprehensive approach to her setting—temples buried in the jungles of Yucatán, in the heat, the great wilderness of the tropics. Instead it was just temples, beautifully and abstractly photographed. This failing was balanced somewhat by a group of pictures of modern Mayan Indians, a series on their home life and agriculture which is the best objective photography of people that she has yet published. Again, the pictures were accompanied by a readable and highly authoritative text. It made one wish she had been as probing with her camera as she was with her pen.

When Duell, Sloan, and Pearce asked her to photograph as well as write a popular book on the eighteen hundred miles of the Rio Grande, she accepted at once. In photographic circles there was criticism of the publishers' choice: "She wouldn't be able to handle it; it's completely out of her field," and so on and on. Gilpin ignored these criticisms. She started her work in a snowbank in Colorado and followed the Rio Grande to its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico.

The Rio Grande: River of Destiny challenged her on her weakest resource, a working experience in sociology and economy. She conceived of the Rio Grande as a timeless current running through nature, a force that excluded man except where the river chose to interrupt his destiny. This concept explains why Gilpin chose to almost exclude man from the picture.

This is functional in the birth of the river amid the peaks of the Rockies. Here Gilpin catches the eternal life of the river with a brilliant selection of symbol pictures—the melting snow and alpine flowers, the weather-beaten mountain junipers and gnarled stumps. Here she also photographs her most vital people, in an environment she wholly understands—men in nature, sheepherders, foresters, cowboys, and prospectors, who appear like wayfarers in the timeless journey of the river. Through New Mexico, too, she shows a concrete feeling for the place and the people.

But as the river flows sleepily through the plains of Texas, her concept breaks down seriously. Here, where man has made perhaps the most spectacular use of the river, the book becomes colorless. It was also here that in her field work she encountered her greatest difficulties. Three times she covered the lower reaches of the river, but each time she encountered the same frustrations. She apparently was unable to create a shooting script that would bring in the drama of the great agricultural region and the modern enterprise of Texas.

Here the Rio Grande left the West of lonely mountains and plains and entered a region where the background was not nature

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but man. Her material at once became hypersocial; the river became a servant to man's resourcefulness, the economic life-stream of one of the greatest large-scale farming regions in the United States and of a comparably rich region in Mexico. True, this is a recent development, within the last generation, but should it for this reason be discounted? In the book, the river just flows by, more in harmony with the sleepy world of Old Mexico on the south than the boisterous booming state of Texas to the north.

It is certainly valid to look upon the Rio Grande as a "river of destiny," but it is a great disappointment to the reader to learn little of man's use of the river through the centuries. Two aspects have not been developed—the people who have lived by the river, and how they have used its waters. These subjects are touched upon here and there, but never with consistency. The reader would like to see systematically the character of each group that lives by the river. In the same way the reader would like to know how the men of each culture use the waters, how they irrigate their gardens as well as how they pan their gold. And the reader would want to see the harvest of the Rio Grande land, from chili to cotton. Only then would he have a picture of the Rio Grande as a river of destiny.

The Rio Grande, despite its shortcomings, is a rewarding volume to own. In every aspect it is an honest experience; the tremendous labor and tenacity of the author is met in every chapter. In the whole volume there is not one "slick" picture nor one glib phrase. In this day of sugar-coated journalism, this sincerity gives the book a deeply satisfying character.

The book's significance in Laura Gilpin's development is tremendous. The Rio Grande book has placed her among the few published writer-photographers of the country, and at the same time has exposed her to the criticism of the leading social documentarians, geographers, and photo-journalists. Gilpin is not disturbed. She views the reactions to her book thoughtfully, with-

out antagonism. In fact, she recently bought her first miniature camera.

Laura Gilpin's energies are without limit. She is now about to start on a project even more challenging than the Rio Grande, an essay on the Navajo. After years of photographing nature's timeless forces that have moulded man, she is now going to photograph man himself and man's devastating effect on nature. This seems, indeed, the completion of the long creative development of Laura Gilpin.