



Tutucanula - El Capitan 3600 ft. Yo Semite, Carleton E. Watkins

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Carleton E. Watkins

1861

Albumen silver print

16 x 20 3/16 in.

85.XM.361.8

Questions for Teaching

Take the time to look closely at this photograph. What do you notice first? Where do your eyes move next?

What shapes do you see? (*Triangles, organic shapes, etc.*)

What kinds of lines do you see? (*Curvy lines, vertical lines, etc.*)



Which lines and shapes are repeated and thus form patterns? (*Triangles, vertical lines, etc.*)

What do you notice in the foreground, middle ground, and background? How does the artist create balance in the composition? (*The tall trees on the left in the foreground along with the dark mountain peak behind them help to balance out the light-colored looming cliff on the right in the background. The positive space of the cliff is balanced by the negative space of the sky.*)

Imagine you are walking around the scene depicted. What would you hear and smell? How would you describe the mood?

This photograph was made when there were no roads to these areas of Yosemite, during a time when a camera was as big and heavy as a large television. Instead of camera film, negatives were printed on mammoth glass plates that weighed about four pounds each. How do you think the photographer was able to make and bring home thirty mammoth plates from the wilderness? (*A photographer at this time would have used mules to transport supplies and the help of several people to prepare and develop glass plates at the site.*)

How does this nineteenth-century photograph contrast with photographs made today? (*Black and white, sepia tone, curved image at the top two corners.*)

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Background Information

While the monumental facade of El Capitan (also called Tutucanula) looms in the background, a thin decaying trunk in the foreground demands the viewer's attention. In nature, where changes can occur in seconds or centuries, Carleton Watkins found the perfect subjects to convey a theme of transience versus permanence. The same decaying tree appears in another photograph by Watkins, *River View—Down the Valley*, which was taken in the same location but with the camera directed about thirty degrees to the east (www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=62145).

Watkins's images helped define America's preference for landscape views depicting rugged wilderness and celebrating spectacular landforms on the grandest of scales. Photographs such as *Tutucanula - El Capitan 3600 ft. Yo Semite* revealed to people the beauty of Yosemite and convinced people that they should protect its trees from being torn down for homes and businesses.

John Conness of California, who served in the U.S. Senate from 1863 to 1869, owned a set of photographs by Carleton Watkins and proposed that Yosemite Valley be protected from development. In 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite Valley Grant Act, marking the first time that the federal government reserved land for conservation reasons. Under this act, the state of California was required to protect the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove (a grove of sequoias in the southern part of what is now Yosemite National Park). The bill decreed that the "premises shall be held for public use, resort, and recreation."

About the Artist

Carleton E. Watkins (American, 1829–1916)

In May 1849, at 19 years old, Watkins sailed from his native New York to Panama. In early 1850, at the age of 20, Watkins arrived in California. After he established his own photographic practice, he made his first visit to Yosemite. There he made thirty mammoth plates and one hundred stereograph views that were among the first photographs of Yosemite seen in the East. Partly on the strength of Watkins's photographs, President Abraham Lincoln signed the 1864 bill that declared the valley inviolable, thus paving the way for the National Park system.

In 1865 Watkins became official photographer for the California State Geological Survey. He opened his own Yosemite Art Gallery in San Francisco two years later. The walls were lined with 18 x 22 inch prints in black walnut frames with gilt-edged mats. Such elegant presentation did not come cheaply, and Watkins was accused of charging exorbitant prices. A poor businessman, he declared bankruptcy in 1874 and his negatives and gallery were sold to photographer Isaiah Taber, who began to publish Watkins's images under his own name. Watkins, however, continued to photograph, and seven years later became manager of the Yosemite Art Gallery, then under different ownership. The San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 destroyed the contents of his studio, which he had intended to preserve at Stanford University.

