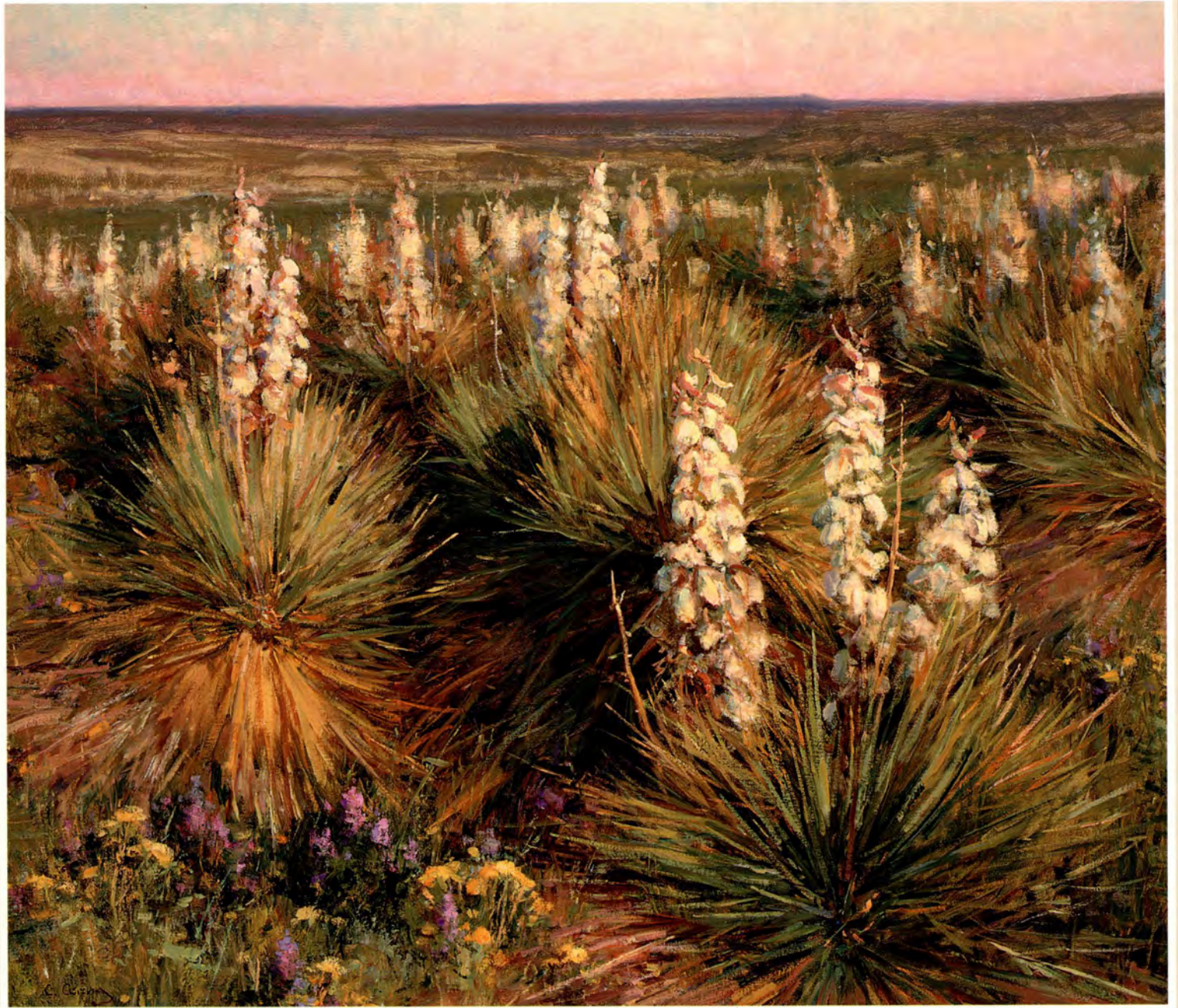


# BIG SKY JOURNAL

ARTS 2007



LANDSCAPES OF THE WEST: CLYDE ASPEVIG

OUT OF AFRICA IN MONTANA

LITERARY GODFATHER OF THE NEW WEST: WILLIAM KITTREDGE

SHOOTING YELLOWSTONE WITH WILDLIFE CINEMATOGRAPHER BOB LANDIS



# FIFTY AND FABULOUS: MUSEUM OF THE ROCKIES

*In caring hands, Bozeman's museum flourishes over time with curator Steven Jackson*

By Cynthia Logan

MUSEUM OF THE ROCKIES

**F**ifty years ago, Dr. Caroline McGill uprooted an amazing collection of antiques and memorabilia (much of which consisted of treasures received as barter for her services as a physician) from a Butte apartment and her 320 Ranch in Gallatin Canyon, and planted it in three Quonset huts on the campus of Montana State College (now MSU, Bozeman).

Determined to share her passion for the Northwest, she convinced history department head Dr. Merrill Burlingame that a museum was essential. Then, though knee problems

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1957 touch history 2007

had forced professional retirement, she slept for six months on the floor of the huts with student volunteers, tagging furniture, textiles, glassware, tools, paintings and historical artifacts, including an ivory sculpture of a nude, reclining woman. (Forbidden to expose themselves to anyone but their husbands, female Chinese patients would point at the "doctor doll" to indicate ailments.) From such vision, dedication and labor, the Museum of the Rockies was born.

When the Quonsets were slated for demolition, the



PHOTOS: TOM FERRIS



**Opposite:** MOR curator, Steven Jackson, is a self-proclaimed “museum junkie.” **Above:** The traveling Picasso exhibit at the Museum set the pace for Jackson’s vision to bring the world to Bozeman.

museum relocated to a nearby dairy barn. Burlingame recalled “cows going out one door as exhibits came in the other.” In 1972, the first of the modern building complexes was completed; this final move established safe, clean storage and a permanent home for the museum, which tripled its size in 1989.

Today, the MoR, described by the hip “Lonely Planet” guidebook as “Montana’s most entertaining museum,” is a premier natural and cultural history site, renowned for its paleontology department. It also features fine art, and houses one of three significant photo archives in the region, stewarding nearly 300,000 objects.

In charge of a great number of those objects is Steven B. Jackson, Associate Curator of Art and Photography. “This museum is unusual in that it’s multidisciplinary,” he says, striding past the alluring King Tutankhamun exhibit and down to the basement.

“They stick us curators back in the dungeons,” he explains. “But that’s OK, we’re close to our collections that way.”

The maze of cement hallways (“Da Vinci Code’s” Louvre intrigue comes to mind) delivers us to a workroom Jackson considers the hub of museum activity. A high-tech haven, it’s also where the future of collections access lies. Numerous computers and a high-end archival digital printer await commands. He sits down, clicks on the “Indian Peoples of the Northern Great Plains” Web site he spearheaded, then places his left fingers around his right wrist, where they remain encircled for most of an hour.

“I started out at the museum when we didn’t have a single computer,” he mentions. Along with paleontologist Jack Horner, Jackson has been here the longest (he began as a photographer in 1981). Weaning himself off a clunky typewriter, Jackson taught himself computer software languages and programs, as well as Web and database design. Since he no longer has to deal with darkroom chemistry, Jackson can quickly scan and print large requests for archival images from among the many sites he has created.

“Photo-curators are still a pretty rare breed,” he com-



PHOTOS: COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF THE ROCKIES

"Big Mike" watches over the Museum of the Rockies entrance.

ments. "I've had assistants in the past, but I'm back to being a one-man department."

His blue eyes analyze the data onscreen from behind wire-rimmed glasses. "Anyone in the world can search these images a number of ways," he says, noting that the "Great Plains" site is particularly popular.

Among those using it is Joe Horse Capture, Associate Curator of African, Oceanic, and Native American Art at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts. "It is such an important resource; I use it at least once a month," Horse Capture states. "Steve has a certain passion and sensibility for his work; he is very versatile and has a great eye for photography."

Indeed, photography has been one of Jackson's passions since high school. Born in 1955 to an artistic family (both his grandfather and great-grandmother were painters and his mother was an art teacher), Jackson "pretty much grew up with the smell of turpentine. I kind of jumped ship when I became a photographer."

The photo archive he now curates contains historical images from the Northern Rockies of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming dating back to the 1860's, captured as daguerreotypes,

ambrotypes, tintypes, original negatives, or as motion picture film. Among the most actively sought-after images are those in the Ronald V. Nixon Railroad collection.

"There's a whole world of railroad historians out there that I've just been exposed to," exclaims Jackson, his enthusiasm escaping a natural reserve. It flows full throttle when he pulls up his personal Web site and begins discussing his intuitive, improvisational relationship with objects. "I'm fascinated with fine art photography, and art created with found objects (Dada sculpture). I'm a modernist."

Traditionally, curators are also historians, and are expected to publish during the course of a career. Today, they are often practicing artists, exhibiting rather than publishing. "I tend to do a little of both," says Jackson, whose work has been displayed throughout the United States and is represented in both public and private collections. He begins a piece with sketches, negatives, or digital camera images that evolve through assemblage, drawing, painting and digital manipulation.

"Through a studio, camera and computer process, I alter the photograph, which becomes a ground upon which

*The photo archive contains historical images from the Northern Rockies of Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming dating back to the 1860's.*

my ideas can evolve," he explains.

Jackson admits to being a museum junkie—he and his wife, Camille, particularly like The Frick Museum in New York, located in a former mansion where furniture from the

## THE MUSEUM OF THE ROCKIES

is a unique blend of art, history, paleontology and science. Its exhibits and programs—from lectures, camps and permanent collections—reflect the unusual culture, past and present, that makes up the Northern Rockies.

### UPCOMING EXHIBITS:

#### *Penguins of Antarctica*

A collection of detailed color photographs from J.J. L'Heureux that teach about these Arctic inhabitants.

September 1 to October 21, 2007

#### *Ansel Adams: The Man Who Captured the Earth's Beauty*

Featuring 25 black and white images from a master photographer and conservationist who interpreted wild places in the West.

November 10 to January 6, 2008



16th century is a collection focus.

While he doesn't rearrange the furniture at home, Jackson has a natural talent for arranging exhibit layouts. The exquisite *Picasso Ceramics* displayed at the MoR through mid-August 2007 reflects his gift for object placement. He is particularly fond of the *Shepherding in Paradise* exhibit he curated a number of years ago and is looking forward to installing the upcoming *Penguins of Antarctica* display, as well as laying out and lecturing on *Ansel Adams: The Man Who Captured the Earth's Beauty* in the fall.

Apologizing for the messiness of his 'corner office' (the mess consists of piles of paper on his desk), Jackson verbally delves into the storage and preservation of objects deemed worthy of perpetuity. Two walls sport original historical photos, another displays his "Primordial Soup."

It's cool in this windowless space—we're near the photo archives, where temperature control is paramount. Donning a pair of white gloves, Jackson points out the Halon gas fire suppression system. He picks up an old photo album, kept for its inherent worth rather than its storage capacity. "You don't see this kind of thing much anymore," he remarks. Sliding out some glass plates, he notes their position on the bottom shelves in case of earthquake.

Further down the hall, Jackson flashes a magnetic key-bob, gaining access to a room with all manner of crates, containers and cabinets, each holding precious cargo. He encounters another door, again flashes the bob and this time is required to code in a number sequence to gain entry. Layers of security protect everything from dinosaur bones and a camera collection, to sculpture and a set of Russell Chatham original paintings.

"What keeps a fairly routine job interesting are the materials you're working with," says Jackson. "They are unique and that's why they're here. It's humbling, because it will end with someone else: a museum goes on beyond the lifetime [and] career of any one person. You're helping shape the nature of a collection, but are just one of many who will be involved in that endeavor."

As the Museum of the Rockies celebrates its 50th anniversary, both staff and supporters can be confident that collections are currently in capable hands; that objects tended by Steven Jackson are given the same careful attention afforded them by a physician's hand half a century ago. **BSJ**