An Enduring Force: The Photography of Laura Gilpin among the Twentieth-Century Navajo

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While some artists travel the world in search of inspiration, Laura Gilpin found hers in the arid, desert landscape of the southwestern United States. Gilpin had an affinity for the Navajo. In 1968, eleven years before her death, she published the first edition of her seminal work, The Enduring Navaho. A feat in its own right, the collection of photographs and accompanying text was the product of many years spent among the peoples located in the Southwest region of the United States. In the epilogue to her book, Gilpin boldly proclaims her love of the Navajo when talking about the white man’s influence: “Some are simply leading a new kind of life, while many still continue their traditional way. Most young Navajo face this great change with sureness and confidence.” Gilpin lived among the Navajo at various points throughout her life; each time she documented different, but equally invaluable perspectives of daily life on the reservation.

An accomplished and relatively well-known photographer in her day, Gilpin drew attention to the resilient Navajo people and their culture through her work. Other photographers who traveled to Indian reservations, particularly during the nineteenth century, depicted local indigenous peoples as part of a
vanishing race. Edward Curtis, the most well-known of these earlier photographers, journeyed to the Southwest because he believed the Indians faced an imminent extinction (Figure 1). The most recognizable qualities of his work include representations of the stoic Indian chief, the noble savage, and the somber warrior riding off into an even more foreboding distance. Curtis captured images of what he believed were the remnants of an entire race; Gilpin, on the other hand, viewed the opposite. To the determined photographer Gilpin, the Navajo exhibited a desire to live and persevere greater than any other group of peoples she knew. Although some critics accused her of perpetuating stereotypes of Indian peoples, Gilpin’s creative images, especially of the Navajo, reveal the inherent beauty of the peoples of the Southwest as viewed through their habitations, arts and crafts, and ceremonies.

The Navajo reservation, located in the Four Corners region, provided Gilpin a dichotomy of stark, geological formations and organic, earthen structures. The desert held a continuous and significant lure to Gilpin, who was born and raised in Colorado. Prior to venturing out and remaining indefinitely among the Navajo, Gilpin made several other personal and professional photographic expeditions throughout the West. Throughout her career, Gilpin used the landscape to create interesting compositions, whether it figured as the primary subject or as a captivating backdrop for other figures. For example, she photographed the ancient ruins and adobe homes of the Pueblo Indians, creating deeply contrasted areas with intense lighting and dense shadows (Figure 2). She succeeded in establishing a sense of grandeur not readily apparent in the dirt and rocks of the desert. As manifested in her photographs, Gilpin explored the relationship between individual and land. With considerable personal access to the peoples on the Navajo Nation, Gilpin captured intimate scenes of life in the home (Figure 3). Grandmothers caring for grandchildren, figures working in newly irrigated fields, men herding sheep against a seemingly vast background—these scenes comprise just a fraction of Gilpin’s works showcasing the abundance and splendor of the land. Connecting the Navajo to the land seemed almost necessary for Gilpin. She began her final publication relating how the Navajo have endured after centuries of abuse: “The People felt a surge of hope as

4 Gilpin, The Enduring Navaho, 250.
5 Faris, Navajo and Photography, 138.
6 Forster and Gilpin, Denizens of the Desert, 6.
8 Gilpin, The Enduring Navaho, 79–104.
they began to till new fields, to start new flocks, to build new hogan, and to live the free life which was the very essence of their being." Gilpin documented this intimate relationship with the land, in a manner impossible to accomplish without her unquestionable talent and skill. She created extraordinary photographs from decidedly ordinary activities. To her, the Navajo did not simply live in huts on a barren wasteland; they laid claim to each vista, canyon, and tree lying within their midst. They utilized every resource, as evidenced by the magnificent arts and crafts produced on the reservation.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the Navajo—at least for fellow artist Gilpin—presented itself in the form of hand-woven textiles, tooled jewelry, and exquisitely-crafted vessels. Women assigned to the task of creating the exceptional tapestries assumed the central focus in Gilpin’s images involving the loom. Though the women may seem figuratively trapped in their role to the uninformed outsider, Gilpin’s photographs depict the contrary. The indelible skill exhibited by the weavers resonates throughout Gilpin’s images, with the women appearing content, even happy (Figure 4). In a letter to a friend, Gilpin’s longtime companion Elizabeth Forster expressed the following, which also adequately represented her partner’s ideas: “Some time ago I decided that I would get my friends to teach me to card, spin, and weave as all Navaho women do. . . . Each of my friends has to show me her own particular method and all must laugh at my awkward efforts.” The laborious process employed in textile production renders Forster’s assessment easily justifiable. Beginning with shearing the sheep, the women then engaged in washing, spinning, dyeing, and finally, weaving. The actual weaving of blankets, rugs, and other pieces of clothing required exceptional patience; not only did the women remain in a sitting position throughout the entirety of the process—of which completion time for a single piece ranged anywhere from a couple months to over a year—but they also memorized and retained numerous types of designs and patterns in order to create a variety of styles. Gilpin photographed the weavers approaching not as a stranger but as a close friend and confidant. She glorified the female weaver, showcasing the delicate movements of the hands, attention to detail, and enjoyment she derived from her occupation.

Gilpin exhibited the same care and creativity in her images of jewelry-makers. The focus of these photographs rests on the expertise of the silversmiths and the intricacy of their designs. By documenting both the artist at work and examples of the finished product, Gilpin promoted the long-established artistic traditions

9 Ibid., 19.
10 Forster and Gilpin, Denizens of the Desert, 82.
11 Gilpin, The Enduring Navaho, 134.
of the Navajo. The strategic placement of lighting softens features of individuals which thereby aids in creating a bond between subject and viewer (Figure 5). Gilpin’s admiration and respect for those she photographed reverberates especially in her images of artists, including potters and basket-makers. Though the art of pottery and basket-making continues to rapidly diminish among the Navajo, Gilpin sought to emphasize the importance of the awe-inspiring crafts. The beauty of the simple yet incredibly detailed forms, thoughtfully captured by Gilpin, is magnified in her photographs. Her considerate attitude toward the subject encourages a desire in the viewer to gather around the artist, learn more, and delight in the privilege of witnessing such an event. Gilpin documented not only Navajo potters, but also Pueblo Indian potters along the Rio Grande. Her careful attention to composition is evident in her work among the serene potters and basket-makers.

The intense focus demonstrated by the basket-makers derives from the special nature of the baskets’ use in ceremonies. Ceremonies, an integral part of the Navajo way of life, often elicit feelings of confusion and apprehension among those in the non-Native community, yet, those feelings dissipate when viewing Gilpin’s photographs. Rather than elaborating on the already mystical nature of the various ceremonies, she captured her subjects in such a way that makes them relatable to an otherwise ignorant audience. The medicine man or woman—an individual of significant importance on the reservation—appears not as a distant figure but an approachable, friendly person. Gilpin granted these individuals a human quality long absent in the collections of other photographers: emotion (Figure 6). The manner in which she framed the figure, allowing him or her to physically center the image and pushed the foreground even further towards the viewer, thereby fostering the connection between Native subject and non-Native observer. A smiling medicine man seems almost a contradiction to an ignorant public. The smile belies the importance of the figure; the medicine man assumed responsibility for the numerous ceremonies conducted on the reservation. As the caregiver and healer of the physical, mental, and spiritual ailments of the tribe, the medicine man or woman participated in all of the various ceremonies, committing to memory the required chants and blessings. Gilpin’s companion Forster proclaimed the following while witnessing the Yeibichai Chant: “The ‘stage’ illumined by the rosy light of many fires, the painted bodies and strange costumes of the dancers, their weird rhythmic and unmelodic song...and the

audience a dark mysterious mass on either side.” The scene described by Forster generally represented all Navajo ceremonies; excitement among the crowd quickly built at the thought of witnessing such a spectacle. However, though Gilpin attended several such ceremonies, her camera remained idle. Her refusal to photograph the sacred events of the Navajo stands as a testament of her respect for the peoples living on the reservation. The resulting images from her time at the ceremonies depict seemingly mundane activities; yet, true to her style, Gilpin managed to find the special in everyday life. She searched for the opportunity to photograph clusters of peoples as much as, if not more than, individuals. Women making fry bread at the ceremony became the focus rather than the ceremony itself. The dynamic of the figures frying bread, talking, and laughing with one another renders itself a captivating sight. Gilpin maneuvered her way into the circle, taking photographs as a friend rather than outsider. Like her compositions of landscape and artisans, Gilpin’s images of women gathered at ceremonies beckon the viewer to come closer, to experience the scene as though an invited guest. Gilpin’s ability to establish a sense of camaraderie with her subjects encouraged a relaxed, carefree demeanor for all involved, much unlike the stiff poses found in the images of earlier photographer Edward Curtis. Part of Curtis’s campaign among the American Indians included trying to document all aspects of daily life, yet his attempts only furthered stereotypes of Native peoples. Curtis manipulated his Navajo subjects to reflect his pre-existing beliefs about their imminent extinction. Grim and lifeless portrayals of headdress-wearing, blanket-clad figures comprise the bulk of his collection. Along with blatantly taking advantage of the Navajo—at least regarding their physical appearances—Curtis staged the scenes, bringing in props and other excess items to create romantic portrayals of the indigenous peoples. The solitary Indian riding towards a fading sunset—a familiar trope of Curtis—symbolized the impending doom facing the Native peoples. A predecessor to pictorialism, characterized by blurred images, mystical themes, and the desire to express mood, Curtis’s photographs similarly feature seemingly otherworldly figures held static in the past. His photographs have a mysterious, almost spiritual quality to them; that mystery, or manipulation in this case, encouraged the perpetuation of stereotypes about Indians. Many have argued Gilpin’s photographs lie in the same vein, primarily due to her early years of working in the pictorialist style. Granted, her early images of the Maya in Mexico and the Pueblo Indians of the Southwest

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14 Forster and Gilpin, Denizens of the Desert, 49.
hearken back to the mystical, contrived photographs of Curtis. Yet, with the passage of time her style changed remarkably.

Gilpin abandoned the once-popular pictorialist style—particularly evident among the earlier photographic depictions of the Navajo—in exchange for clearer, sharper images. Gilpin’s primary objective during the course of her time on the reservation remained the same—depict the Navajo as enduring beings, not as members of a vanishing race. Her focus on the three aforementioned areas, habitation, arts and crafts, and ceremonies, identify her as a proponent of tradition as well as vitality. Living, breathing individuals appear in the majority of her works, with no place for the somber warrior and stoic chief (Figure 7). People endure, and the Navajo will endure. As Gilpin stated her epilogue to The Enduring Navaho: “We can but hope that those essential qualities that are the birthright of the Dinéh . . . will never be lost. Song and singing are the very essence of Navaho being, and as long as the Navaho keep singing, their tradition will endure.”

Laura Gilpin deserves a significant and respected position in the history of American art. She photographed the personal and intimate lives of the Navajo, only possible because of her genuine respect for the peoples of the Southwest. Her creative compositions and attention to detail have aided in destroying stereotypes of American Indians. Yet, her greatest achievement will forever be her photographic collection of an enduring people: the Navajo.

Carlyle Schmollinger is currently a senior graduating with a degree in art history and curatorial studies. While she is passionate about many aspects of art and art history, she is especially interested in Native American artists. She hopes to one day work in an environment that seeks out and supports Native art by Native artists. Photography particularly inspires her, as she is now trying to understand her own identity through using the camera. Her senior thesis is focused on the work of contemporary Native American photographer Zig Jackson. This essay was written in Twentieth-Century American Indian History taught by Dr. Jay Buckley.

16 Martha Sandweiss, Laura Gilpin: An Enduring Grace (Fort Worth: Amon Carter Museum, 1986), 44.
17 Gilpin, The Enduring Navaho, 250.
Figure 1. Edward Curtis, “The Vanishing Race,” 1904, gelatin silver print.

Figure 2. Laura Gilpin, “At the San Ildefonso Pueblo, New Mexico,” 1927, platinum print, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.
Figure 3. Laura Gilpin, “Navaho Twins [Edith’s Babies]” [Near Betatakin, Arizona], September 1953, gelatin silver print.
Figure 4. Laura Gilpin, “Old Lady Song Salt, Spinning, Navaho Mountain Area,” 1954, gelatin silver print.
Figure 5. Laura Gilpin, "A Navaho Silversmith," 1934, gelatin silver print.
Figure 6. Edward Curtis, "Hastobiga, Navaho Medicine-man," prior to 1930, photogravure.
Figure 7. Laura Gilpin, “Navaho Hands,” 1953, gelatin silver print, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.