



Smithsonian American Art Museum

## Eadweard Muybridge

THE CENTRAL AMERICAN JOURNEY

*Eadweard Muybridge: The Central American Journey* is on view from February 2, 2007, through April 29, 2007, and is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The Museum is grateful to Judith and Charles Moore for their generous support of this brochure.

*Note:* All images are in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and are by Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904) from his album *The Pacific Coast of Central America and Mexico; the Isthmus of Panama; Guatemala; and the Cultivation and Shipment of Coffee*, published in 1877.

cover: *Falls of the Michatoya—Palin, Guatemala*, 1875, albumen print, 5 1/2 x 9 1/8 in., Gift of Mitchell and Nancy Steir, 2000.105.8



above: *Lake Amatitlán, Guatemala*, 1875, albumen print, 5 3/8 x 9 3/8 in., Gift of Mary and Dan Solomon, 1997.105.30

right: *Panama from the Parade Ground*, 1875, albumen print, 5 1/4 x 9 1/8 in., Gift of Mitchell and Nancy Steir, 2000.105.5



# Eadweard Muybridge

*In his Central American photographs, Muybridge presents complex and conflicting landscapes dense with history and culture.*

*In February 1875*, Eadweard Muybridge slipped aboard a ship in San Francisco harbor, bound for Panama City. A renowned photographer, he had earned recognition throughout California and beyond for his dramatic landscapes of Yosemite Valley, but at the moment his fame was overshadowed by notoriety. The previous year, Muybridge had delivered a fatal shot point-blank to the chest of Harry Larkyns, a confidence man who was involved with the photographer's wife, Flora, and who Muybridge believed to be the father of her newborn son. Muybridge surrendered peacefully and was acquitted of the murder after a well-publicized trial. Still, it was thought advisable he leave California until the scandal died down, and within weeks he had arranged an assignment with the Pacific Mail Steamship Company. *The Central American Journey* presents the remarkable body of work Muybridge made during that trip.





## Born Edward Muggeridge

*Shipping Coffee, Champerico, Guatemala, 1875, albumen print, 5 3/8 x 9 1/4 in., Gift of Jeffrey A. Lichtenberg in honor of his parents, Laura and Harold Lichtenberg, 1999.97.39*

near London, England, in 1830, Muybridge immigrated to the United States in his early twenties, establishing himself as a bookseller in New York and later San Francisco. After being advised by his doctor to spend time out of doors while recuperating from an injury, he turned to photography. Mastery of his new craft, and commercial success, came almost immediately. Notably, he was a grand prize medalist at the Vienna Photographic Exhibition of 1873 for “scenic views,” and his early fame was built upon these oversize or “mammoth plate” landscapes capturing the spectacular natural features of the Sierra Nevada.

Muybridge is most often recognized today, however, as a pioneer of “instantaneous” photography. In an effort to confirm the notion of “unsupported transit,” a moment in a horse’s gait when all four hooves lift free of the ground, Leland Stanford—a former governor of California, United States senator, president of the Central Pacific Railroad, and racehorse breeder—

hired Muybridge to freeze an image of a racehorse traveling at full speed. At a time when most photographs required exposures lasting several seconds, his results in arresting motion in a fraction of a second were stunning.

### DISTANT LANDSCAPES

While much has been made of Muybridge as scientist-photographer, it is evident from this exhibition that above all he was a pictorial artist, skilled at and devoted to photographic landscapes. In his Central American photographs, Muybridge presents complex and conflicting landscapes dense with history and culture. Sponsored by the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, a once thriving business that found itself facing financial ruin as a result of the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, Muybridge was engaged to promote Central America as a destination both for tourists and investors.

His first stop was Panama City, where his arrival on March 16 was noted in *The Panama Star*: “... he comes here now to illustrate by views all the curious places that a traveler

by the Railroad and the Pacific Mail Company’s ships can see or be within reach of in a journey from New York to San Francisco, via the Isthmus.” Beyond proper views of the town plaza and various options for tourist lodging, Muybridge sought to entice visitors with picturesque photographs of Spanish colonial architecture. Among his photographs were images of abandoned churches, seemingly misplaced, their roofs collapsed, wrestling with the wilderness and slowly being reclaimed by the surrounding jungle.

### GUATEMALA IN TRANSITION

No place revealed the complexities of a culture in transition more than Guatemala. It is tempting to see Muybridge’s photographs through a veil of nostalgia, as images of a distant or exotic culture frozen in the past. At the time of the photographer’s arrival, however, the country found itself in the midst of a transition that was to forever alter its traditional way of life. In 1871, Guatemala had undergone a shift in government that led to a period of rapid social and economic change. The Guatemalan economy was struggling under a double burden from the obsolescence of an overland transportation route that had once been a thriving commercial artery and the decline in the market for cochineal, a natural dye that was once the country’s primary export. The government’s answer to this economic downturn was to promote the export of coffee, which gave Guatemala a valuable product to

trade on the international market and regular cargo for the Pacific Mail Steamship Company to transport to California. But this economic shift carried broad consequences. As land was consolidated into large commercial holdings under the control of urban owners and the country shifted from an agrarian to a commercial economy, farmers who had once lived with a degree of independence became laborers bound to the massive plantations. While the government saw this agricultural shift as a path toward economic independence and modernization, the cost was the destruction of many of Guatemala’s traditional communities.

Muybridge captured this shift to industry and investment in his photographs. Presenting an orderly view of stability and progress, he documented all stages of coffee production: the domestic life of laborers, neat rows of plantation fields, the harvesting of the crop, the milling, and the loading of ships headed north.

Muybridge also documented Guatemala City and its environs, including the neoclassical architecture of the town plaza and cathedral and the city’s numerous civic and commercial properties. Not immune to the natural landscape, Muybridge captured the dramatic vistas that characterize his best landscape photographs. He photographed the coasts of Mexico and Central America at ports of call along his journey and also made an extended trip into the Guatemalan interior, finding mountain landscapes like

*Plaza, Guatemala, 1875, albumen print, 5 1/4 x 9 3/8 in., Gift of Mary and Dan Solomon, 1997.105.26*



those of his home state. His view of the Falls of the Michatoya River is both powerful and graceful, the river swiftly dropping alongside a road that arcs through the jungle. Other landscape photographs include images of Guatemala’s volcanoes, whose unmistakable profiles dominate the skyline as well as the towns hugging their flanks.

In the 1870s, most photography was done with a glass plate negative, hand-coated with light-sensitive chemistry before each exposure. Not only a cumbersome process, the chemicals at the time were not equally sensitive to all colors of light and often rendered blue skies as blank and overexposed.

Muybridge’s technical command provided a solution, and he often made two negatives of a scene, one exposed properly for the landscape



*Hacienda William Nelson, San Isidro, Guatemala, 1875, albumen print, 5 1/4 x 9 3/8 in., Gift of Jeffrey A. Lichtenberg in honor of his parents, Laura and Harold Lichtenberg, 1999.97.31*

...as images of a distant or exotic culture frozen in the past.

and one for the sky. The final print was then made by combining the two negatives, giving many of his images their notable cloud-filled horizons. Although he did not invent this process, there were few photographers who used it as effectively.

His experiments with panoramic photography were another notable achievement, with multiple prints combined side by side to give the effect of a three-hundred-and-sixty-degree view. Muybridge made an eleven-part panorama of Guatemala City, of which several frames are seen in this exhibition. He also made a number of sequential images, which give the impression of strolling around the walls of Panama City. The following year, in 1877, Muybridge was to make two panoramas from the top of Nob Hill in San Francisco, the city seeming to pour forth in all directions before his lens. These earlier Central American views were crucial studies for what would turn out to be the final landscapes Muybridge would make before turning his efforts completely to the study of human and animal movement.

### END OF A JOURNEY

Upon his return to California in November of 1876, Muybridge edited the hundreds of photographs from his voyage and published a selection the following year in an album titled *The Pacific Coast of Central America and Mexico; the Isthmus of Panama; Guatemala; and the Cultivation and Shipment of Coffee*. Several albums were offered as gifts to his patron Leland Stanford, the lawyers who assisted in his defense, and the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, while others were available for purchase through his gallery. Ten are known to have survived, including one from which the prints in this exhibition are drawn. Seen together, the prints offer an exciting glimpse of a tumultuous moment in Muybridge’s career and give a fuller understanding of photography’s many roles and the accomplishments of one of the nineteenth century’s most innovative artists.

arresting motion