FREDERICK MONSEN OF THE DESERT—THE MAN WHO BEGAN EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO TO LIVE AND RECORD THE LIFE OF HOPI-LAND: BY LOUIS AKIN

The story of Frederick Monsen—Monsen of the Desert—is the traditional story of the artist. The beginning of it has all the hardship and disappointment and hope deferred that usually falls to the lot of the man who has a new and significant thing to say to the world, but who lacks the pushing, commercial instinct needed to make himself immediately audible. The thing that is worth hearing is always audible in the end, however, and in this case the traditional story is the one with the triumph in it—the triumph of faith, perseverance, and genius over all obstacles.

About twenty-five years ago, Frederick Monsen came to this country from his native Norway, a youth equipped with little save a good education augmented by some technical artistic training and an inheritance of like temperament from a notably artistic family. Newspaper work—as artist and writer—carried him to the West within a couple of years, and it was there, in Colorado, that he began the work which has since developed into a recognized art, of which he is not only the originator but the ablest exponent, the art of portraying by means of the camera the beauty of a little known part of our country and the individuality of a picturesque and fast vanishing race. He began photographing Indians while connected with the Geological Survey, and the fascination of the work, together with the great possibilities of its future value both to art and to history, have held him to it ever since.

During all these years Mr. Monsen has spent the major part of his time living as close to the Indians as a white man comfortably may, throughout the breadth of that land of enchantment—the Great Southwest. There, in their most primitive and remote villages, he has lived and worked, gaining by his sympathetic understanding the never ending confidence and good-will of the Indians, and so gaining command of material for his work that could never be acquired at a price. This access to the intimate life of the people, combined with his own skill and artistic judgment, has given Mr. Monsen a collection of pictures not only of great artistic value, but of absolutely unrivaled significance as historic and ethnological records.
MONSEN OF THE DESERT

Naturally, it is the rare artistic quality in his work that most interests me, knowing as I do from my own experience something of the difficulties to be overcome in making a success of any attempt to depict the gentle folk of the Desert. Only the sense of fellowship which Mr. Monsen has established with the Indians can account for the almost entire absence, in his pictures, of one objectionable feature so marked in most Indian photographs—that of a display of self-consciousness on the part of the subject. It is true that many of his photographs are made “unbeknownst,” but even those that are obviously posed are still sympathetic and characterful, in striking contrast with the elaborately “picturesque” photographs so often seen.

THIS difference is the very obvious distinction between art and commercialism, the distinction that marks the work of the man who, because of years of tried friendship, is welcome in every pueblo, hogan or wickiup in all the Southwest, as entirely separate from that of the “commercial traveler” who speeds through the country with the camera in one hand and the ever-ready dollar in the other, apparently under contract to photograph every last living specimen of the American Indian, regardless of anything but quantity and popular selling quality. To be sure these latter pictures have their place, but it is not in art, and I emphasize the distinction because this man has more truly and sympathetically portrayed the peaceful Indian of the Desert than has anyone who has followed him, and all the modern band of “Indian photographers” are his followers.

While the Desert Indians, by long odds the most picturesque and primitive of our remaining aborigines, would be sufficient in themselves to furnish material for a lifetime of endeavor, it is not only among the people that Mr. Monsen has found his work. His keen artistic sense would not permit him to pass by the strange and beautiful physical features of the country they live in, and these form some of his most fascinating subjects. He has gone deeply into the chemistry of light and color as well as photography, and has used all his technical training, as well as new methods that are entirely his own, to express in his own medium the wondrous color, space and atmosphere of the Desert Land. I know of what I speak; for I also love the Desert and spend my life trying to express it with pigments on canvas, but all the knowledge gained through my own efforts give only an added
MONSEN OF THE DESERT

zest to my appreciation of the truth and perfection of the pictures Mr. Monsen enlarges from his tiny films. No whit of the brilliancy of light is lost, no depth or pure transparency of shadow is missing, no delicate variation of the Desert’s own incomparable opalescence or overwhelming vastness is absent, and in its more rugged phases of mountain or canyon no particle of its primordial strength and grandeur is found wanting.

While Mr. Monsen is not a man with a “mission,” but does his work because of the joy he finds in achieving the expression of the beautiful, he has yet taken a deep interest in the welfare of the Indians among whom he has lived so long. It would have been impossible for him to have spent so many years in such intimate association with them without having made his own influence felt by them, not the influence resulting from any direct effort in that direction, but the influence of right living and square dealing, of merely being in their eyes a good specimen of white man. Under these circumstances he naturally has acquired an unusually broad and comprehensive knowledge of conditions among them, and also some strong ideas as to the right care of them, granting that at the least we owe them care. He has seen how civilization has encroached on them year by year, and has been a close observer of its effects, and what he says on the subject in the following article is with the authority of judgment formed on absolute knowledge of conditions.

Of all the ideas he advances as the result of his long experience with Indian capabilities and characteristics, none is more vital than the position he takes with regard to the destruction of the ancient crafts and the attempt to replace them by modern commercial work that is practically valueless as well as hideous and commonplace. Mr. Monsen holds that if the Government would send to them instructors who would exercise some intelligence in reviving and preserving the wonderful old handicrafts of the peaceful tribes, instead of giving the children instruction in the trades and industries of the white man, the Indian would not only take more kindly to the white man’s idea of education, but it would be a great deal easier for him to earn a living. More than this, Mr. Monsen holds that in the preservation of the Indian crafts, as well as Indian traditions, games, ethics, morals and religion, there lies a strong influence for good that would ultimately affect our modern art and life.

682