KARL MOON’S PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF THE INDIAN OF TODAY: BY WARD JEROME

WITHOUT intimate acquaintance and exhaustive observation it is impossible to obtain true conceptions of our North American aborigines. Few men have had the talent, coupled with opportunity, successfully to portray the particular characteristics of the Indian of the Southwest, whose home embraces the almost inaccessible regions beyond the confines of civilization. The serious study of these primitive races requires not only technical ability of a rare order, but also considerable courage and endurance to withstand dangers and hardships not encountered while pursuing other studies of nature.

Although yet a young man, Karl Moon has made for himself a record in the art world as a truthful delineator of this vanishing race. Close contact, constant opportunity and incessant study, together with great natural powers of observation, have combined to give Mr. Moon excellent qualifications for his chosen work. Ever aiming to be true to his idea of the simple life of the Indian, his portrayals show wonderful knowledge of his environment and characteristics.

In his studies of Indian heads he probably displays his greatest skill as an artist. They are remarkable for originality and forcefulness, revealing in every light, shade and expression the touch of one who has been a long-time student of serious portraiture. To be able to place a true valuation on this branch of his work one must pause to consider the numerous difficulties encountered in attempting to make artistic as well as natural portraits of these people in their own country. To give all the quality of a studio lighting in the portrait study of an old Apache, taken in the open, over one hundred miles from the borders of real civilization, presents a most difficult problem. The portrait which he calls “The Last of the Council” is an excellent example of his ability to overcome this difficulty.

It seems to be the popular belief that the Indian of this generation has the same romantic disposition and warlike tendency of bygone days. It is a much deplored fact, however, that he is rapidly degenerating before the advance of the white settler, and in accord with those laws of Nature governing the “survival of the fittest,” will so continue to degenerate until his identity is lost.

SIX years of close acquaintance with the various tribes of the Southwest has not caused Mr. Moon to pose as a sentimental admirer of the godlike qualities so often erroneously attributed to the Indian of this century. He readily distinguishes the false from the true. The refinedly critical blending of the romantic with the
"OF THE TRIBE OF THE TAOS": A STRONG TYPE OF NORTH PUEBLO INDIAN; FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY KARL MOON.
"ANTONIO," A NAVAJ0 YOUTH OF THE AGGRESSIVE TYPE: FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY KARL MOON.
"WAITING FOR THE SIGNAL": FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY KARL MOON.
"NEARING THE END OF THE TRAIL"
FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY KARL MOON.
"THE LAST OF THE COUNCIL": AN OLD WHITE MOUNTAIN APACHE; FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY KARL MOON.
commonplace facts, as he sees them, is an art he seeks to make peculiarly his own. The beholder is strikingly impressed with a sense of poetic beauty rising above the ordinary and identifying itself with the tribal traditions of past centuries. A particularly apt example of the rational conception he strives to illustrate in embodying the spirit of the past with the material facts of the present is to be seen in his photograph "Nearing the End of the Trail."

Of this study, the Washington Herald says: "It is a picture that suggests Millet in its atmospheric quality, and it has a poetical significance, too, for it is plain to be seen that the figure is nearing the end of two trails—not alone the trail that leads to the end of her material journey, but the trail of life also."

At the invitation of President Henry Fairfield Osborn, of the American Museum of Natural History, an exhibit of Mr. Moon's studies was recently held in New York. He also had exhibits at the new National Museum in Washington, D. C. The Astor Library, New York, has a collection of his studies and private collectors have long recognized the value of these photographic records.

Commenting on his work from an ethnological standpoint the New York Sun says—"A man who is so artistic and so persistently studious in the photographing of these primitive people can scarcely help becoming something of an ethnologist, so much of a one indeed that professional ethnologists welcome his work as an aid to their own."

Aside from historical interest there is always present that spirit of romance so mysteriously woven about the lives of these people and to which every critical observer pays homage.

Mr. Moon took up the study of oil colors that he might get nearer the painting quality in his photographic studies, thus giving to them the finished effect of authentic paintings. His oil work is done upon the prepared prints; the treatment is broad, rough and free, giving a refined combination of photographically accurate drawing and clear coloring. His color work is not to be compared, however, with his photographic prints, yet undoubtedly his determination to perfect this method of coloring will eventually result in very artistic productions. He believes that accurately colored photographs in the permanent oil medium must have a greater ethnological and historical value for the coming generation, after the Indian has lost his identity in the oncoming wave of civilization, than will the monotone prints.

A marked characteristic of his work is the absence of all evidence of the white man. His constant endeavor to be logically accurate bears out his remark that he "wishes to make pictures that will not only live but also be of practical value to the students in generations
to come, who will have to depend largely upon the pictorial records that are being made today."

Mr. Moon began his Indian work at Albuquerque, New Mexico, in nineteen hundred and four, coming into the Southwest after six years’ experience in portrait photography in some of the largest studios of the East. He later removed to Grand Canyon, Arizona, in the very heart of the Indian country, and where at the present writing he has his studio. In his field work he goes unaccompanied and carries nothing but necessary working material—his cameras and a small pack outfit comprising his entire equipment.

Of difficulties to overcome and hardships to endure we will say little. Suffice it to remark that the noticeable cheerfulness and optimism predominating in Mr. Moon’s interesting personality are sufficient to carry him over all obstacles in the way of success for his art.

It has been his good fortune while in Grand Canyon to be able to place his work under the critical observation of the many eminent artists and connoisseurs who often visit this picturesque spot. The manifold advantages to be acquired from their discriminating criticism and prudent counsel are self-evident.

Modest and unassuming, cheerful and buoyant, Mr. Moon’s personality is everywhere evident in his work. Simplicity and force of character, free from the intrusion of deformity or vulgarity, emphatically marks his art of creating pictures that present clearly to the eye the beauty and symmetry that is sought through camera and brush. Seen from a purely ethnological point of view his photographic studies are of inestimable and permanent value to scientific research.