

MICHAEL LESY: STATEMENT OF PLANS

Before there was television, with its nightly news and special reports, before there were newsreels with their twelve minutes of marching men, bathing beauties, and disasters, there were stereo views. From the late 1850s until the mid-1920s, when the first news photo magazines appeared in Europe, people watched the news of the world in 3D, by looking at it through stereo viewers. Battles and catastrophes became stereo views within a week of their happening; domestic comedies, droll or salacious, were staged, photographed, and then sold as series; presidents, premiers, actresses, and authors agreed to become views so they could be passed around and admired in sitting rooms.

In the US, in the decade before the First War, drug stores and sundry stores sold packets of stereo views, six for a dollar. (A 1910 dollar could buy what \$ 22 buys now.) In the summer time, college students peddled sets of "Tours of the World", packed in boxes that looked like miniature encyclopedias; during the school year, public schools used "Education Series" stereo views (complete with teachers' guides and viewers) to supplement their history, social studies, and current events classes. Every view, no matter where, why, or how it was sold, had a caption on its front, and a narrative on its back. Read today, these captions and narratives reveal the implicit and explicit assumptions of their readers: "*As we have already noticed in our journey through Central America,*" explained the narrative on the back of a 1911 educational view, "*the native population of these countries is neither enterprising nor progressive.*"

In the first of three prophetic articles published in *The Atlantic Monthly*, Oliver Wendell Holmes (famous father of the famous son) wrote: "We do now distinctly propose the creation of a comprehensive and systematic stereograph library, where all men can find the special form they particularly desire to see as artists, or as scholars or as mechanics or in any other capacity." (*The Atlantic Monthly*, June, 1859.)

It took nearly 120 years and the commercial collapse of the last and largest stereo view company in the US (and the world) for Holmes' proposal to become a reality. In 1978, the entire 300,000 image inventory (complete with original negatives) of the Keystone View Company was donated to the California Museum of Photography at the University of California, Riverside.

There it now sits, all 30 tons of it, in a seismically protected facility, presided over by a curator and a crew of work study students, whose job is to fill the desultory requests that come in for images of a particular person, place, or event.

Two grants, ten years apart, from the National Endowment for the Humanities enabled the Museum to make high resolution scans of a tiny portion of its inventory—18,000 "American subjects"; 9000 more from "Egypt, Palestine,

Jordan, Syria, Morocco, and India.” The rest of the collection’s images and negatives sit in file drawers, waiting for a researcher to do more than order a picture of Teddy Roosevelt or the Pyramids or a 1908 street view of London.

The project I propose to the Foundation is to explore a single, significant part of the Museum’s immense, non-digitized, and unexplored collection. *LOOKING BACKWARDS/ Images of the World at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century, 1900-1910* will be based on images made by Keystone View photographers who, like modern photojournalists, were dispatched to cover people, places, and events as they happened in the US, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America during the first, tumultuous decade of a tumultuous century.

Then as now, distant wars, savage cruelties, natural disasters, and technological breakthroughs were the stuff of the news---and of common human reality. The Boxer Rebellion and the Russo-Japanese War, the assassination of William McKinley and the rise of Theodore Roosevelt, the San Francisco Earthquake and the eruption of Mt. Pelée, the first Model T and the first flights of the Wright brothers, the Wall Street Panic and the depression that ensued—these were just a few of the events that characterized those times and have analogues today.

W.W. Norton will publish a book (leading to an ebook) of 300 sequenced, duotone images based on what I discover in the Museum’s vaults. The California Museum of Photography has asked me to curate an exhibition to coincide with Norton’s book. Curators at the International Center of Photography in New York have said they are eager to join the California Museum in raising money to (1) bring the exhibition to New York, and (2) to mount it, in California and New York, using the most advanced digital hardware and software available. One of the exhibition’s most startling “Back-to-the-Future” possibilities will be based on the capacity of rapidly developing software and hardware to display stereo images from *LOOKING BACKWARDS* in three dimensions. The images will be viewable—displayed on iPads, mounted on gallery walls—without glasses or hand-held devices.

The “rarely seen/long unseen” quality of *LOOKING BACKWARDS*’ documentary images, and the “then vs. now/past vs. present’ nature of those images will explicitly and implicitly convey all that has been gained and lost —by the US and Great Britain, Germany and Russia, Japan, China, and India, Turkey, Egypt, and Iran, Argentina and Brazil, South Africa and the Congo—over the course of 110 years.

As a book, *LOOKING BACKWARDS* will be structured chronologically and topically. For example, a sequence on China would precede a section on the Boxer Rebellion; a sequence on Russia would precede a section on the Russo-Japanese War. Short expository and analytic essays will frame its chapters. At

the core of these essays will be the understanding that the images in the book have a double identity: They are windows that provide a view of the vanished but eerily familiar world of our ancestors, and they are mirrors that are still etched with our ancestors' understandings of the world they inhabited. The captions and narratives on the front and back of every image in the book will be reproduced, and, where appropriate, will be analyzed. But: Though the analysis of such printed texts may be relatively easy to do, the analysis of the meanings, visible on the surface of the images and coiled beneath them will be more challenging—and—because such meanings are hidden in plain sight—more revealing.

The thousands and thousands of archival images I plan to investigate are like the frozen, winter words that Paul Bunyan once described: Spoken during the coldest months of the coldest winter, they hover, suspended in the air, like ice crystals, waiting for the seasons to change so that all that was once said can melt and be heard again. If the images I plan to study are like words—if, in fact, they are the equivalent of thousands and thousands of words—then my mission is to warm those “words”, hear their sounds, understand their meaning, and turn that meaning into music.