LAURA GILPIN and the TRADITION of AMERICAN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY

fig. 3: **Storm from La Bajada Hill, New Mexico**
by Laura Gilpin, gelatin silver print, 1946
© 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
Bequest of Laura Gilpin

iii

The Rio Grande: River of Destiny (1949), her next book, included a more mature and carefully detailed explication of the ideas developed in the Pueblo book, and it established Gilpin as a cultural geographer. (19) John Brinkerhoff Jackson, himself a student of the American landscape, reviewed the book as a "human geographical study," noting that Gilpin "has seen the river from its source to its end and permits us to see it through her eyes, not merely as a photogenic natural phenomenon, but as a force that has created a whole pattern of living, that has created farms and villages and towns and that continues to foster their growth.... Miss Gilpin is undoubtedly the first photographer to introduce us to the pueblos, the Spanish-American communities, the whole countryside of farms, as something more than picturesque." (20)

Gilpin began work on the Rio Grande book in 1945, just after leaving a wartime job with the Boeing Company, and during the next four years she traveled more than twenty-seven thousand miles to make photographs for the project. Because gasoline and film were in short supply, she traveled on borrowed gas ration coupons and was forced to limit herself to one exposure of each scene. She packed in on horseback to photograph the river's source in Colorado, and she chartered a small plane to fly her over the river's confluence with the Gulf of Mexico. Her plan for the book dictated the content of her pictures: "The people - the Spanish Americans, the Mexicans and the Anglos are important but are subservient to the river. The people come and go - the river flows on forever." (21) Thus she made few portraits, focusing instead on landscapes and pictures that showed the people in the context of their environment. She organized the book geographically, following the river down through the Colorado mountains and the fertile San Luis Valley, into the Indian and Hispanic regions of northern New Mexico, and out through the ranching areas of west Texas and the Mexican borderlands.

The photographs in the book are more forceful than the romantic, evocative pictures in the Pueblo book, and they reflect Gilpin's increasing self-confidence as a photographer and her

growing preference for a more sharply focused style. Her text, however, reveals that she had not abandoned her interest in the cultural context of the landscape. Though her Rio Grande landscapes may appear to be unpeopled, pristine bits of wilderness, they are still, as in the Pueblo book, part of a broader cultural environment. Consistently describing the Rio Grande in terms of its significance to human culture, Gilpin identifies the river as a source of irrigation water, a shaper of immigration and settlement patterns, a repository of mineral wealth, a source of food for livestock, and a provider of natural town sites. Gilpin's favorite picture in the book was *Storm from La Bajada* (1946), a dramatic image of a huge, flat-bottomed storm cloud hovering over the Jemez Mountains of north-central New Mexico (fig. 3). Good fortune, intuition, and skill had allowed her to capture the image. In her book, she provides an explicit context for this landscape which, like many others in the book, contains no visible sign of human presence. Violent storms, she notes, can wash away precious topsoil and flood arroyos with dangerous rushing water that can sweep away "many a vehicle, horsedrawn as well as automotive.... It is thrilling, sometimes terrifying, to watch such a magnificent storm sweep over the land." There is a similar emphasis on the power of the natural landscape to shape human culture in most of the captions. The text accompanying her photograph of Taos Mountain speaks of the mystic symbolism of the mountain in Taos Pueblo religious thought; the text beneath an image of the mountains near Las Cruces, New Mexico, stresses their value as a nineteenth-century military outpost. (22)

The anthropologist and photographer John Collier, Jr., found the essence of Laura Gilpin's westernness in this continuing interest in the interplay between human culture and nature. "The easterner's milieu is so often man against man," he wrote in 1950, "in contrast to the westerner's vision of man against the mountains, man finding his way across the vast plain, the personal challenge against wilderness, time, and space." (23) Thus he correctly identified the central concern of Gilpin's work as the interconnection between people and the natural environment. But Collier misplaced his emphasis. Gilpin's interest was never so much in the personal challenge against the wilderness as in the challenge to accommodate to it.

fig. 4: Rio Grande Yields Its Surplus to the Sea
by Laura Gilpin, gelatin silver print, 1947
© 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
Laura Gilpin Collection

In *Rio Grande Yields Its Surplus to the Sea* (1947), the final photograph in *The Rio Grande,* the sunlit river snakes across a dark delta toward the Gulf of Mexico, its waters' eighteen-hundred-mile journey at an end (fig. 4). The image provides a visual coda for the book as well as an opportunity for Gilpin to make her concluding comments about the precarious relationship between people and the natural world, a relationship easily upset by human greed:

> Since the earliest-known existence of human life in the Western world, all manner of men have trod the river's banks. With his progressing knowledge and experience, man has turned these life-giving waters upon the soil, magically

> evoking an increasing bounty from the arid land. But through misuse of its vast drainage area - the denuding of forest lands and the destruction of soil-binding grasses - the volume of the river has been diminished, as once generous tributaries have become parched arroyos. Will present and future generations have the vision and wisdom to correct these abuses, protect this heritage, and permit a mighty river to fulfill its highest destiny?(24)

Almost immediately upon finishing the Rio Grande book, Gilpin decided to do a book on the Navajo, a tribe she had photographed extensively during the early 1930s when her life-long companion, Elizabeth Forster, was working as a field nurse in the small Navajo community of Red Rock, Arizona. In this book, Gilpin intended to shift her primary emphasis from the landscape to the people, who lived in seeming harmony with the natural world. The Navajo were the Dinéh, the People of the Earth, "moving about in loneliness, though never lonely, in dignity and happiness, with song in their heart and on their lips, in harmony with the great forces of nature." The two salient qualities of the people were their dignity and their happiness. "Both spring from their vital traditional faith, faith in nature, faith in themselves as a part of nature, faith in their place in the universe, deep-rooted faith born of their Oriental origin, moulded and strengthened by the land in which they live." (25)

Shortly after she began her project in 1950, Gilpin was disturbed to learn that the Harvard anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn was also preparing a text on the Navajo with photographs by the LIFE magazine photographer Leonard McCombe. But when *Navaho Means People* came out in 1951, she was relieved to find that the book was nothing like the one she planned. "The Navaho are a characteristically happy people and people to whom the land in which they live means everything," she wrote to her editor. "In that book not one landscape! But my observation is that LIFE photographers never see landscape, nor its effect on the people, nor its importance. I don't want to sound too critical of that book, but I see it all so differently."(26)

Gilpin's book, *The Enduring Navaho* (1968), opens with an explicit statement about the relationship between the Dinéh and their land: "Within the boundaries of their 25,000-square-mile reservation, more than 100,000 Navaho People, the largest tribe of Indians in North America, are striving for existence on a land not productive enough to sustain their increasing population." Before she speaks about the people themselves, she recounts their creation myth and describes the physical terrain of their reservation as seen from the air, focusing on how that terrain influenced historic settlement and migration patterns. Reflecting on her flight afterward, she notes, "It seemed incredible that in the course of a few hours, I could have seen so closely and so clearly practically the entire 25,000 square miles of Navaho domain, and looked down on areas where so much history had taken place. It gave me new insight and understanding of the Navaho and their land." (27) The sequencing of the pictures underscores her text. Aerial views of the Navajo's four sacred mountains, conveying a sense of the larger physical world in which the people live, precede any portraits of the people themselves.

Concern for the physical context of Navajo life pervades the book. In the section on habitation, a distant shot of a lone hogan at the foot of an empty mesa is followed by detailed pictures of hogan exteriors, and finally by views made inside the hogans themselves. The section on tribal government opens with distant views of outdoor chapter meetings, continues with indoor shots of council meetings, and concludes with formal portraits of tribal leaders. Indeed, everything about traditional Navajo culture seemed to Gilpin to be dictated by the physical landscape - the symbols of Navajo religion, the domestic architecture, the sheep-based economy, the simple diet.

fig. 5: A Chance Meeting in the Desert
by Laura Gilpin, gelatin silver print, 1950
© 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
Gift of Laura Gilpin

With pictures and words, Gilpin conveys an overwhelming impression of the vastness of the landscape and the small scale of the people who have adapted to life there with seeming ease. In *A Chance Meeting in the Desert* (1950), a figure on horseback and a man on foot converse in the middle of a sweeping, empty stretch of desert. Dark storm clouds hover over the buttes and mesas on the horizon; sunlight pours through the clouds illuminating the scrubby land behind the two figures (fig. 5). Gilpin notes that she was so intent upon watching a young shepherd in one direction "that we did not see a young man approaching on foot from another. Then up out of a wash appeared a lone horseman who stopped to talk with the young man on foot. After a while each went his separate way as we watched them all disappear." The picture she chose for the dustjacket of her book is similar, reiterating her fascination with the graceful accommodation of the people to their land. A young Navajo woman holding a cradleboard sits on a burro. Her young son sits behind her and an older boy stands shyly behind the burro. Gilpin notes that she encountered the family by chance as she approached "a slight rise in the undulating desert.... They seemed miles from any habitation, yet in the gentle rise and fall of the desert it is remarkable how a hogan can be hidden from view." (28)

The theme of Gilpin's book is revealed in her use of the word *enduring*. Gilpin found no evidence that the tribe Edward Curtis once referred to as "the vanishing race" would soon disappear. The Navajo she depicted could accommodate to change as easily as they could adapt to their desert environment. Most important, they could do so without losing the essential values of their culture. Her book includes a photograph of a young man proudly posing in the uniform of the National Park Service, his long hair tied back in traditional Navajo style. A modern-day medicine man poses with his two traditionally dressed daughters, while his son wears the ubiquitous denim jeans and jacket uniform of the modern West. A woman in traditional dress covers her head with a shawl and laughs beside a carefully arranged collection of soft drink bottles. (29) Gilpin lamented the passing of the colorful covered-wagon days, but she accepted the inevitability of change and had an unshakable faith in the ability of the Navajo people to adapt to new ways. Concluding her book with a section on Navajo tradition and ceremonialism, she writes, "Many who know the Navaho will think that the great days of ceremonialism are lost. Possibly this is true, but I cannot believe the old ways will really be lost.... We can but hope that those essential qualities 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" (fig. 6). (30)

fig. 6: Shepherds of the Desert
by Laura Gilpin, gelatin silver print, 1934
© 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
Gift of Laura Gilpin

As she worked on her Navajo project, Gilpin came increasingly to identify with her subjects' deep affection for their land. After attending a Nightway ceremonial she wrote, "feeling the assembled reverence as the Prayer to Dawn is sung in the chill, clear Southwestern air, makes one realize the strength and beauty to be derived from closeness to the elements. Here is something vital, something real." (31) Indeed, she began to identify with many of the attributes she ascribed to the Navajo people: the material poverty of their traditional ways, their interest in creating functional art of great beauty, their profound sense of history and tradition, their respect for the land in which they lived. She never thought of herself as a Navajo and never presumed to understand the intricacies of Navajo religion and ceremonialism. Yet Gilpin did not feel presumptuous at all in claiming with pride that *The Enduring Navaho* was done "from *their* point of view. That's the whole point. They see the difference.... They like it and I don't care about any other part of it." (32)

Gilpin's book on the Rio Grande had explored her own connections to the Southwest. The Navajo book allowed her to ally herself with one of the region's ethnic groups. In her next project, on the Canyon de Chelly, begun in 1972 when she was eighty-one years old, she sought an even more intimate connection with the native peoples of the Southwest as she documented the lives of the handful of Navajo families that lived and farmed in the canyon. When one of these families put on a picnic in her honor, in thanks for the gift of a photograph of a deceased family member, Gilpin called it, "a Navajo gift. That was a day I'll never forget because it just summed it all up.... It was just that I was accepted by them, I think, as much as anything else - as somebody that understood them." (33)

fig. 7: Big and Little Shiprock, New Mexico
by Laura Gilpin, gelatin silver print, 1951
© 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
Gift of Laura Gilpin

Photography had become her way of getting close to a people whose history and traditions seemed deeper than her own; photographs had become her means of appropriating some of that tradition for herself and experiencing the land as those with the strongest claim to it experienced it. This deep sense that she, too, was somehow a part of the landscape and tradition she photographed is what distinguishes Gilpin from the other great photographers of the American Southwest (fig. 7). Nineteenth century explorer-photographers like John K. Hillers, Timothy O'Sullivan, and William Henry Jackson were always outsiders, cataloging the natural wonders of the terrain for their employers. Gilpin's contemporaries, Ansel Adams and Eliot Porter, worked as she did out of a compulsion to photograph what interested them, but their concern was never with people's place in the wilderness. Often working with conservationist groups, both photographers wanted to create a record of what the landscape looked like untouched by humans. Their preferred role was that of a respectful outsider peering in with awe at the fragile natural world.

Gilpin, by contrast, created a record of the Southwest as a historical landscape; a landscape with a past measured not just in geological or evolutionary time but in human time, as evidenced by architectural ruins, ancient trails, and living settlements. It was a landscape with intrinsic beauty, but one whose greatest meaning derived from its potential to change and be changed by humankind. Gilpin did not dislike the idea of a wilderness, but for her there was no true wilderness in the Southwest, no area that had remained untouched by more than a thousand years of human settlement. With her imagination, she peopled the empty vistas she photographed, speculating what life might have been like (or might in the future be like) for those who settled there. She generally avoided extreme close-ups of her natural subjects (which were made by many of her male contemporaries) because emblematic details could never suggest the intricacies of the interrelationship between people and nature that made the landscape a compelling subject for her. Gilpin knew that the Southwest sometimes provided a nurturing landscape, sometimes a hostile one. She knew that the landscape could be modified by human action, but believed that it would and should remain the dominant force shaping and molding human culture.

The Navajo people, living in "harmony with the great forces of nature," accepted the immutable fact of their landscape and provided, for Gilpin, an exemplary model of human adaptation to the environment. There was "nothing superfluous about the Navaho;" no bit of waste or extravagance in the way that they lived. (34) They lived with respect for their land, taking only what they needed, and adapting their homes, their economy, and their way of life to the rugged high desert terrain.

All text © Martha Sandweiss.
All photographs © Amon Carter Museum.