

# THE HOPI PHOTOGRAPHS

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## KATE CORY: 1905-1912

KATE CORY: ARTIST OF ARIZONA  
*MARNIE GAEDE*

A HOPI ESSAY, CAPTIONS & QUOTES  
*BARTON WRIGHT*

PHOTOGRAPHIC REPRODUCTIONS  
*MARC GAEDE*



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## KATE CORY: ARTIST OF ARIZONA

ON A TORRID AFTERNOON IN 1905 A TRAIN rumbling through the Arizona Territory suddenly stopped at Canyon Diablo, in the middle of nowhere. A porter jumped down, unloaded some luggage, and the train pulled away, leaving a single passenger—Kate Thompson Cory—standing in the hot, gritty wind. She shielded her eyes against the glare of the sun and watched her link with civilization roll out of sight. When it was gone she lowered her hand. Above her a hawk banked on a thermal. Something yapped in a canyon. Antelope studied her from a barren ridge, ready to run. She had an anxious moment then, but it passed. After all, if things didn't work out she would simply present her ticket, go back to New York City and continue the pleasant, uneventful life well-bred ladies of her era were encouraged to lead.

Not much is known about Kate Cory's earlier years. She was born February 8, 1861, in Waukegan, Illinois. Her father, James Y. Cory, was the editor of the *Waukegan Weekly Gazette*. A crusading Abolitionist and an organizer of the Under-

ground Railroad, he came to the attention of Abraham Lincoln, and they soon became friends. She received an art education at Cooper Union and the Art Student's League in New York City. She never married. We must assume that she made art during this period, but none of her work has survived.

In 1904 she attended a social gathering of the Pen and Brush Club, an organization of New York artists. She was introduced to Louis Akin, a painter who had just returned from a year of work on the Hopi mesas of northern Arizona. It didn't take long for Akin, ecstatic about the beauty and the strange Indian culture he had found there, to convince her that it was a perfect place to start an artist colony.

Although Akin's dream didn't come true, Kate Cory never used that return ticket to New York. She couldn't have known it at the time, but the moment she entered Arizona the adventure of her life began. She would find in the Southwest whatever it was she couldn't get in New York. And in the process become one of the very few outsiders ever allowed to look into the heart of Hopi life.

The extraordinary photographs on these pages are a result of that trust. Chosen for their aesthetic and historic importance, they were culled from 642 negatives remaining of the group Cory took in the seven years she lived at the Hopi villages of Oraibi and Walpi, from 1905 to 1912. This collection has never been published before. We have ordered the images according to the Hopi ceremonial calendar, and located descriptions of the scenes they portray from the library of books and articles written about the Hopi since 1776. What Cory has shown us is not only the rhythms of the Hopi day, but social and sacred events never before seen through the lens of a camera. Some of these images are the only visual record of exotic customs which the Hopi no longer practice.

The physical hardships she had to endure at Walpi were enormous. She could have chosen to live in the style of the few whites who had settled in the area, but she preferred to be close to the Indians. Why they accepted her with such grace is a mystery. The Hopi are profoundly suspicious of outsiders, a facet of their culture resulting from centuries of attempted political and religious suppression by the

Spanish, other tribes, and finally by the U.S. But not only did the women welcome Cory into their daily lives, the men—who excluded even Hopi women from much of the religious life of the mesas—invited her into the kivas. This intimacy is apparent in her work.

That she could have achieved such high technical quality in her images is equally remarkable. She became an adept and dextrous photographer at a time when most Americans considered the medium a novelty. And not only was she working in isolation, denied the opportunity to compare notes with colleagues, her access to equipment and supplies was limited. Once her negatives were exposed, she developed them in a primitive darkroom at Walpi using rainwater from which she often had to extract dead rodents before it could be strained. Many of her first efforts were technically crude, but two of the images reproduced here stand out. PLATE 46 is the only known documentation of the violence that flared during the fierce and historically significant split between Oraibians in 1906; PLATE 47 is perhaps the finest early photograph ever taken of the Hopi village of Oraibi.

Cory, through trial and error, finally mastered the medium. The tonal quality in her later work is very high, and could only have been achieved through careful exposure and development. Also, it's clear that she discovered the secrets of focusing—her pictures became sharp corner-to-corner. The film speed at that time was quite slow, yet her images of certain religious ceremonies observed at dawn and dusk are sharp, indicating that she mounted her camera on a tripod. The spontaneity of some other photos demonstrate that she also learned how to *hold* the camera with a knowing hand.

Since photographic collections of the Hopi are rare, it's easy to compare Kate Cory's with the others. A collection of Pueblo photos executed by Edward S. Curtis comes to mind immediately. Curtis customarily arrived at the mesas before a photography session with a wagonload of cultural finery. Then, when his subjects were dressed to the teeth, he posed them. As a result, his photographs look affected and unnatural in the sentimental style of the period. Cory's camera was a quiet presence that recorded people as they really were, dressed in the simple clothing they wore every day. Because

Curtis was attempting to document every tribe in the U.S., he could only spare enough time to show up at the Hopi mesas on ceremonial occasions in fair weather. Cory lived with her subjects, knew them by name, experienced their joy and grief, their births and their deaths, their happiness when it rained, their fear of drought, the heat and the cold they endured. Her understanding and admiration for them informs every photograph.

Other photographers had been to Hopi before Cory. The most notable of these was Adam Clark Vroman, whose recently published collection was made between 1895 and 1902. Vroman was a thorough professional who used glass plate negatives and large view cameras. The clarity of his images is excellent, but they display a certain contrivance that's unavoidable when subjects are conscious of the photographer. Jo Mora, whose images form the only other collection besides Cory's that spans the ceremonial calendar, visited the Hopi from time to time between 1903 and 1912. But his photographs are mostly documentative, lacking the sensitivity and eye for composition that make Cory's images special. After 1912 few interesting photo-

graphs were taken at Hopi. After 1917 there were none. That was the year the Hopi—one of the most unique and most studied cultures in the world—finally got tired of the relentless scrutiny of outsiders and banned photographers from the mesas. To this day, woe be to him who tries to sneak a camera into one of their villages.

Although the ban protected Hopi privacy it also made it difficult to keep a complete record of the past. Before the discovery of the Cory collection, in fact, it was thought that the conduct and design of certain discarded rites and ceremonies she photographed had died with the old priests. We hope her photographs can be useful to those Hopi whose interest in the old ways has recently been revived.

As illuminating as Cory's photographs are, it must be remembered that she came to the Southwest to paint, and that much of her life was spent doing just that. Among the places her paintings are displayed is the Smoki Museum in Prescott, Arizona, and at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington. Only a couple of her friends knew anything about her efforts as a photographer. It

was not something she talked about. Maybe she used her camera to record images she would later attempt to render on canvas; maybe she was actually trying to train herself to be a professional photographer and felt dissatisfied with her progress. We can only guess.

Cory also wrote about the Hopi, publishing articles in a now defunct magazine called *The Border*. And she applied her untrained skills as an anthropological observer to record what she could of Hopi culture. She left behind a diary of events from the years 1907 and 1908, and a dictionary of the difficult Hopi tongue, along with the negatives reproduced here. Although she was an amateur linguist and her pronunciation renditions are imprecise, Cory's investigations are—along with those of Henry R. Voth—the first documentation of the language.

At the age of fifty-one, for unknown reasons, Cory left the mesas. She eventually settled in Prescott and spent the rest of her life there. She built her own home, but never got around to finishing the inside. The house was always cluttered with books, paintings and works in progress. She unexplainably

had the doors installed upside down so the knobs would be too high for children to reach. She shunned most modern appliances and did her cooking on an aging wood stove. She was a vegetarian, dressed in long tattered skirts with ruffles, wore her hair in a bun and rarely accepted social invitations, although she occasionally asked people into her home. Some of her Prescott friends recall a day when the Hopi came to visit. Cory was showing them gifts various Arizona tribes had given her, when their attention riveted on one artifact in particular. It was an old digging stick that turned out to be an important icon representing crop fertility long sought by the Hopi Cloud Clan. They were ecstatic when she returned it to them. Once it was put back in its proper place in the fields, it could be beneficial again.

How Cory supported herself the last half of her life is a puzzle. She sold a few of her paintings to neighbors and a few to buyers. The prices she charged were low and it's doubtful she made a living from them. Her friends assumed she received

trust money from back East but money was another subject she didn't talk about. We do know that one of her relatives, a man who had moved to Prescott for his tuberculosis, left her an insurance settlement when he died. Her clothes were so ragged that fellow members of the Congregational Church let the pastor know they were willing to buy her new clothes. Because she was so thin people thought she couldn't afford to buy food. Yet she gave away money to people she thought needed it more. In one case, she gave away a house and a lot to a man and his bride.

She was considered a congenial, generous eccentric and a very poor businesswoman by those who didn't know her. Those who knew her loved her. In her last years frailty forced her to move into the Pioneer's Home in Prescott, where she died on June 12, 1958 at the age of ninety-seven. She was buried on a knoll overlooking town under a granite tombstone with a bronze plaque that reads: "*Kate Cory, Artist of Arizona. Hers was the joy of giving.*"

— MARNIE GAEDE