

PHOTOGRAPHY COLLECTION

Timothy H. O'Sullivan

Black Cañon, Colorado River, from Camp 8, Looking Above

ca. 1873

Albumen print

8 × 10¾ in. (20.3 × 27.3 cm)

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Melvin and Lorna Rubin Fund

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Timothy H. O'Sullivan's photograph of his boat pulled ashore on the desolate banks of Black Canyon on the Colorado River is a dramatic illustration of the challenges confronting nineteenth-century expeditionary photographers. In the years following the Civil War, O'Sullivan was one of many photographers employed by the governmentsponsored surveys of the American West. Their photographs provided valuable information for the study and potential exploitation of these vast unexplored and undeveloped territories. O'Sullivan's photographs aided the sciences of geography, geology, and anthropology, and even helped promote the continued funding of these surveys.



It was not unusual for O'Sullivan to include evidence of the survey activities, not just the barren landscape. His inclusion of his boat and another member of the survey party gives this photograph a clear sense of scale and accentuates the inhospitable isolation of the canyon's rough terrain. This image is made even more autobiographical and impressive because it shows his portable dark tent set up on his boat; this is where he had to prepare and develop his delicate glass negative in the short time before his collodion emulsion dried and lost its sensitivity.

It is hard to imagine the effect O'Sullivan's photographs must have had on nineteenth-century viewers who were seeing America's new lands for the first time through the lens of his camera. The photographer's focus on his boat and companion at the least added a sense of amazement and authenticity that said "I am here," and the viewer could imagine standing in O'Sullivan's place.