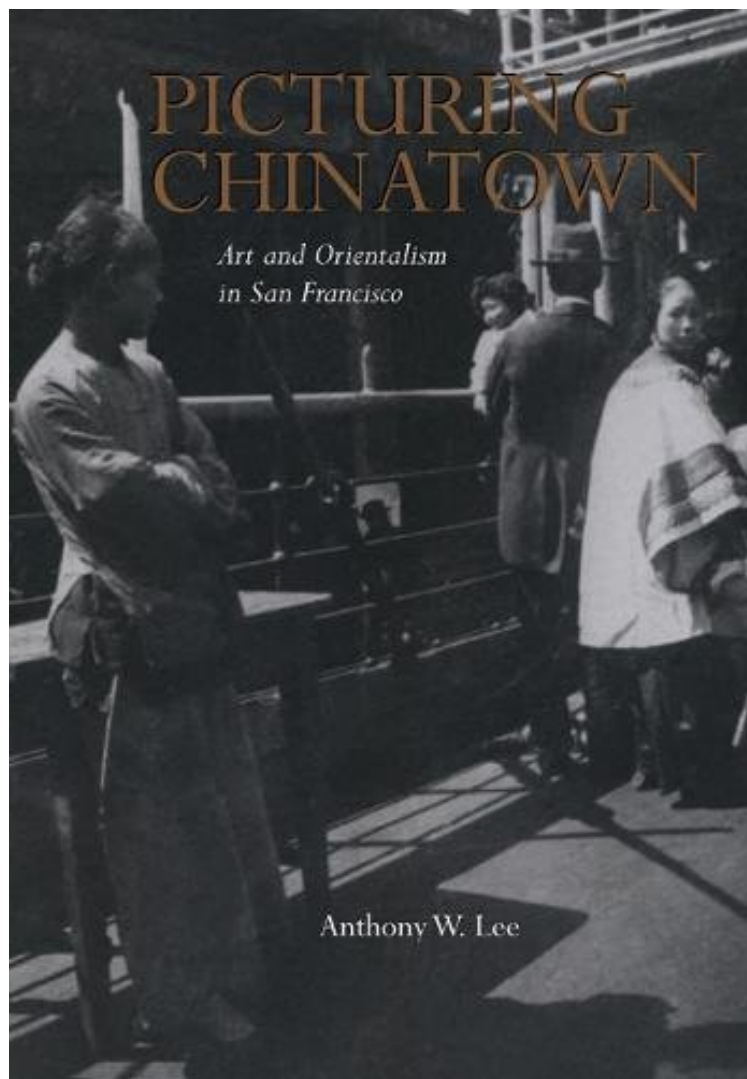


(Ebook pdf) Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco

## Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco

*Anthony W. Lee*

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**Anthony W. Lee : Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Picturing Chinatown: Art and Orientalism in San Francisco:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. The Greatness Of A Culture RevealedBy Michael AdamsWhen we're children we're told partial truths about our history, no matter where we come from. The rich history of Chinatown's contribution to America, as well as many of the roadblocks of racism and fictional lies that tried to take away that history along with their land, is a beginning to 'Fixing' the whitewashing of this country's history. This book is astounding, well written, and one which should be on the shelf of anyone who is seeking out the real history of

America...Not always good, not always right, but always enlightening.3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Overview of Lee's Excellent Book on Art and OrientalismBy Duane DetervilleAnthony W. Lee's book *Picturing Chinatown, Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* is an accounting of the history of Chinatown between the years 1850 and 1950 that uses photography and painting as its main sources. His two primary organizing motifs are "desire" and "difference." Lee characterizes desire as often times invidious and the notion of difference is how the pictures expose the needs and aspirations of their creators. He locates the intersection of these two motifs in the paintings and photographs of Arnold Genthe, Carleton Watkins, Theodore Wores, Louis Stellman, Edward Deakins, Isaiah West Tabor amongst others. One of the author's main premises and method of defending his thesis is the idea that many of the forms that are considered modernist are tied to the discourse surrounding race relations. Edward Said's notion of Orientalism (forming bodies of knowledge about the racialized other as a precursor to conquest) is one of the main theoretical tools that Lee uses to defend his argument. The structure of his argument is broken into six chapters: *The Place of Chinatown*, *Picturesque Chinatown*, *Photography in the Books*, *Revolutionary Artists and The Forbidden City*. The first chapter titled *The Place of Chinatown*, covers the early history of Chinatown's geography. Lee describes Chinatown as a fulcrum or crossroads between the docks that all new settlers had to come through and the San Francisco hills inhabited by non-Chinese settlers. It is significant that all of the settlers had to traverse Chinatown in order to make a place in San Francisco. The settlers, both Chinese and non-Chinese, were predominantly male. The early photographers gained employment through photographing the Chinese. However, the photographic practice was also a way for the non-Chinese to reclaim space. The photograph allowed them to reclaim space in texts and in their imaginations. Lee illustrates this process with a quote from the newspaper *The Daily Alta California*, "Dupont Street is one of the most desirable in the city for retail stores and family residences, and it seems a pity that so fine a street should be occupied with so much filth and nastiness..." The quote illustrates the white settler's invidious desire for Chinatown's land space and how they used the newspaper text to create racialized difference. The chapter titled *Picturesque Chinatown* covers the founding of the Bohemian Club in 1872. It consisted of white male artists, writers and intellectuals who would stroll through Chinatown much the same way the Parisian flaneur did in Europe. However, Lee argues that the San Francisco Bohemian was much more visually dependant than the flaneur of Paris. The way in which the San Francisco Bohemian of the 19th century experienced Chinatown was more attached to visuality than the Parisian flaneur because the flaneur spoke the language of the culture that he was viewing. However, the Bohemian was beholden to his guides to show him around and explicate what he was viewing. Even the sounds of traditional Chinese music would have been entirely new to him. Amongst those bohemians were the painters Edward Deakin and Thomas Wores. Although Chinatown had been photographed in the 1870s there was no body of paintings that represented it. It was the ambition of painters such as Thomas Wores to be amongst the first to render Chinatown on canvas. The picturesque aesthetic was based in a sense of place and these new Bohemian painters had found in Chinatown a new place to render. Lee's third Chapter is titled *Photography and the Streets* and his primary concern in this chapter is to describe the historical basis for pictorialism in Chinatown. Pictorialism, as defined by photographer Alfred Steiglitz, is the notion that there is a permanent value in the picture because of the poetic conception of the subject displayed. Pictorialism becomes aesthetically a kin to Impressionism by approximating painting with blurred photographs and adjustments made in the darkroom. Arnold Genthe is one of the photographers working in this aesthetic. He attempts to achieve candid photos of Chinatown's dwellers by using stealthy methods. He disguised his camera and developed a demeanor that supposedly made him less obtrusive to the environment. However, it is made clear by Lee that Genthe was a white man in western dress and that alone would make him stand out in Chinatown. Nevertheless, Genthe's photographs are of a different type than the portrait photography that had been the main style of photographing early Chinese settlers. The lifestyle of the Bohemian provided Genthe with the method for creating a different type of image than his predecessors. The fourth chapter titled *Photography in the Books* focuses on the work of Louis Stellman. Stellman was assumed to be a student of Arnold Genthe's however there was no formal student teacher relationship. Stellman's work marks a turn from pictorialism to pictures that report Chinatown's changing image after the turn of the century. He also took on the role an explicator of the Chinatown experience by touring the country with his pictures in a slide show. Chinatown had changed during the turn of the century because of events in China that brought a group called the Tong to San Francisco. The Tong were a highly political and engaged in organized crime. In addition, Lee says that the San Francisco fire of 1906 destroyed the old Chinatown. The newer Chinatown had a more westernized inhabitant that was not attached to Confucianism or the wearing of their hair in long queues. These new figures in Chinatown formed the basis for the content of Stellman's two unpublished books titled *John Chinaman* and *Chinatown: A Souvenir and Guide*. Lee focuses on the newly more westernized Chinatown and what role photography books such as Stellman's played in the understanding of that westernization. The painter Yun Gee and his *Revolutionary Artists Club* are the central figures of chapter five titled *Revolutionary Artists*. Yun Gee formed the group in the 1920s around the same time that Mao Zedong instigated the May 4th cultural movement. However, there is no indication that despite the group entertaining a visit from the known Marxist Diego Rivera or his friendship with communist Kenneth Rexroth that he was ever a member of the party. The group had no association with Chinatown leftist groups. The name of the group was reflective of the time in which it was formed. Although

there is very little information about the group it was said that their goal was to create modernist work that was still essentially Chinese. One woman was admitted to the group which is a great change considering the resolutely male nature of Chinatown in the previous century. The photographs of Yun Gee show a very dapper young man aspiring to a cosmopolitan lifestyle. He wears western suits and will eventually make his career in Europe. Lee's sixth and final chapter documents the San Francisco nightclub called The Forbidden City, which was named after the walled city in Beijing China. Charlie Low who acted as both proprietor and MC formed the club in 1938 for the establishment. The performances ranged from burlesque acts to choreographed dancing and comedy skits. Many of the performers were characterized by comparisons to their white counterparts. For example singer Larry Ching is called the Chinese Frank Sinatra and singer Toy Yat Mar is called the Chinese Sophie Tucker. The Forbidden City marks the time when the Chinese are staging Chinatown as a place for tourists. Edward Said calls this the imaginative geography of Orientalism. The racialized other speaking through and by virtue of the Western imagination. Lee's explanation of The Forbidden City through the notion of Orientalism marks how he supports his thesis throughout *Picturing Chinatown, Art and Orientalism in San Francisco* with Edward Said's critical analysis of the western gaze.<sup>4</sup> of 4 people found the following review helpful. glimpses of a vanished Chinatown By W Boudville Don't be misled by the choice of the title. The book is not a coffee-table-type photomontage of San Francisco's Chinatown. It is certainly replete with many photographs and illustrations from Chinatown of the 19th century and early 20th century. No doubt to some readers, these will be the main attraction. Revealing in often hazy black and white the details of a vanished and important subculture of the US. But Lee has integrated the visuals with a narrative that places the images squarely in the context of when they were taken, and of the accuracy of their representations of that culture. He analyses the photographers that took these pictures, and their motives for doing so. Several were not of Chinese ethnicity. But sought to present visuals to explain what was then a very exotic society to an average white American reader. Aside from the contemporary photos, Lee also explains the art that came out of Chinatown in those years. The artwork shown in the book tends to be quite different from the traditional Chinese calligraphy and landscape themes. Instead, there are traces of influence by the European and American art movements of the day.

This visually and intellectually exciting book brings the history of San Francisco's Chinatown alive by taking a close look at images of the quarter created during its first hundred years, from 1850 to 1950. *Picturing Chinatown* contains more than 160 photographs and paintings, some well known and many never reproduced before, to illustrate how this famous district has acted on the photographic and painterly imagination. Bringing together art history and the social and political history of San Francisco, this vividly detailed study unravels the complex cultural encounter that occurred between the women and men living in Chinatown and the artists who walked its streets, observed its commerce, and visited its nightclubs. Artistic representations of San Francisco's Chinatown include the work of some of the city's most gifted artists, among them the photographers Laura Adams Armer, Arnold Genthe, Dorothea Lange, Eadweard Muybridge, and Carleton Watkins and the painters Edwin Deakin, Yun Gee, Theodore Wores, and the members of the Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club. Looking at the work of these artists and many others, Anthony Lee shows how their experiences in the district helped encourage, and even structured, some of their most ambitious experiments with brush and lens. In addition to discussing important developments in modern art history, Lee highlights the social and political context behind these striking images. He demonstrates the value of seeing paintings and photographs as cultural documents, and in so doing, opens a fascinating new perspective on San Francisco's Chinatown.

From *Library Journal* The public perception of San Francisco's Chinatown, home to thousands of ethnic Chinese since the earliest years of the city, has been largely based on the writing and imagery of non-Chinese observers with varied agendas. Portrayed by some as an exotic and dangerous site of tong wars and opium dealing, it was also seen as a crowded living space occupied by sensible, hard-working immigrants. Lee (art, Mount Holyoke Coll.) has attempted to show how outsiders pictured Chinatown by closely analyzing almost 150 photos and paintings from the 1850s to the 1950s. Included are the well-known works of Arnold Genthe and Dorothea Lange, as well as images from the San Francisco Police book of mug shots. Missing from the roster of mostly formal and artistic works are the scores of casual snapshots that must exist in private hands. In addition, Lee does not attempt to use images found in the commercial advertising or popular media of the day. The result is well written, well researched, and beautifully produced, but ultimately this is an academic study that carefully notes crisp facts and then shelves them for other academics to pore over in quiet libraries far from the streets of Chinatown. The real question that Lee approaches but never really descends from the ivory tower to wrestle with is how it feels to have your place in America always defined by other people. David McClelland, Philadelphia Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc. "Contains over 160 striking images made between 1850 and 1950."--"Doubletake magazine From the Inside Flap" In his graceful integration of insights and literature from the disparate fields of art history, history, and ethnic studies, and with his focus on a little known body of visual images and image-makers, Lee has written a book that promises to make a significant contribution in terms of both subject and methodology. The residents of his Chinatown are not merely subjects of an orientaling gaze, they are themselves producers of images, shapers of the neighborhood's distinctive

physical appearance, followers of both American and Chinese political and cultural developments. . . . [This] book asserts the possibilities of images as sources of cultural meaning and reinserts art history into a central position in American cultural studies."mdash;Martha A. Sandweiss, Professor of American Studies and History, Amherst College

"The author invites the reader to understand the paintings and photographs he is examining. . . as sites of human enactment where Chinese and non-Chinese alike participate in acts of cultural encounter." mdash;Rodger C. Birt, Professor of Humanities and American Studies, San Francisco State University