

**Laura Gilpin**

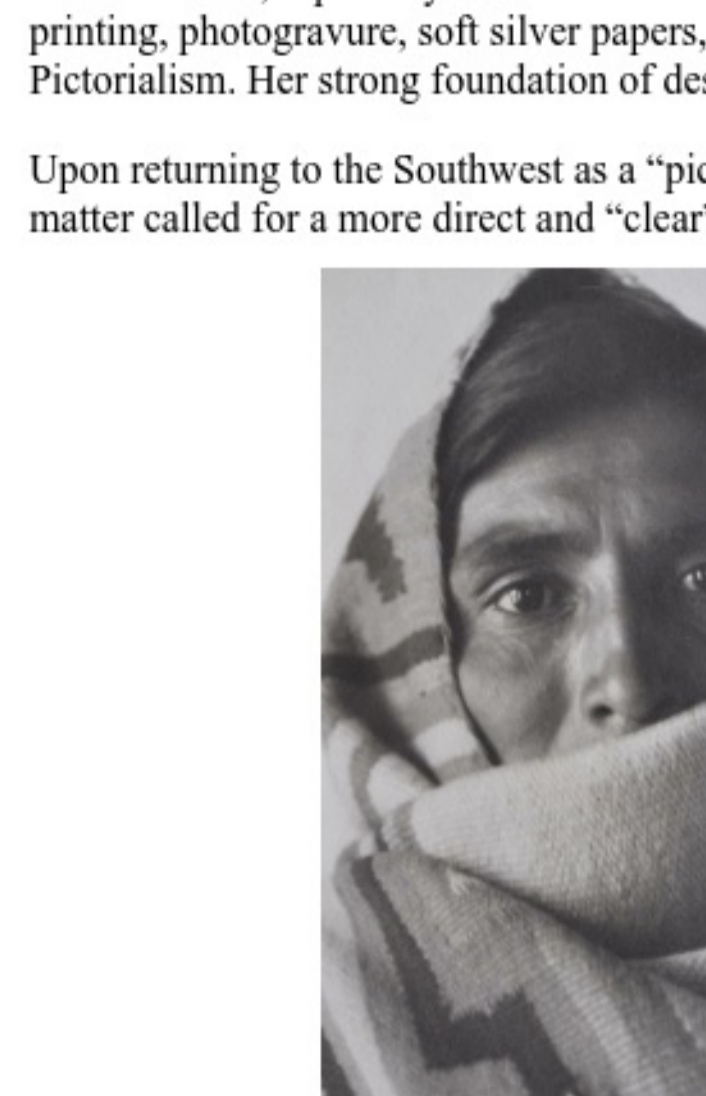
*A remarkable consistency of vision links her sixty years of work. Whether printed on platinum or silver paper, her pictures are characteristically infused with a soft, luminous light, and composed with a simple, classical elegance.*

Martha Sandweiss  
*An Enduring Grace, 1986*

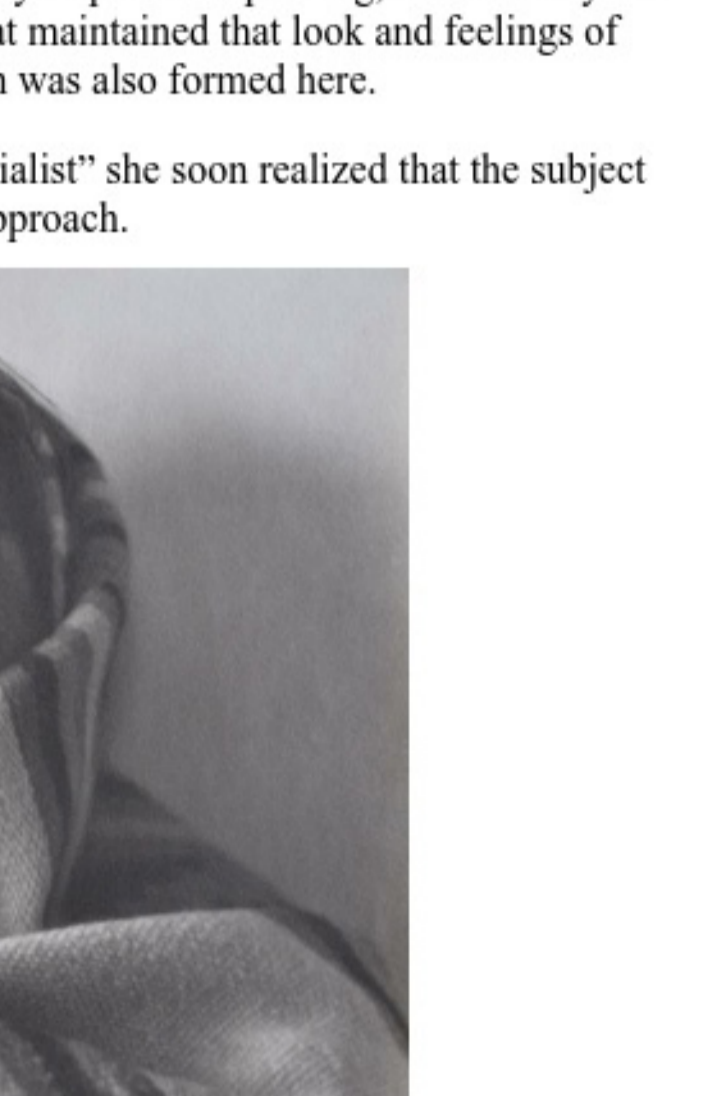
I moved to Santa Fe from Brooklyn, New York, in 1978 with the hope of meeting Beaumont Newhall. I was aware that Santa Fe was considered an art community and although a small town, with a population of about 50,000, I soon realized that within that population there were 10,000 artists.

I slowly became familiar with other photographers who had made Santa Fe their home. Besides Beaumont Newhall, there was Eliot Porter, Paul Caponigro, Walter Chappell, among many others. So it shouldn't have surprised me that while walking just three blocks from where I was living, I passed a small adobe house, set back from Monte del Sol, with a sign posted, LAURA GILPIN. I had not known that she lived here and soon after that discovery I made arrangements to visit her. From her wheelchair, she exuded an energy and lightness of being that quickly made me feel welcome. By her choosing, the conversation was more about me than her. She asked most of the questions. I was shown her darkroom and her studio space both filled with photographs everywhere. She passed not long after that day. As I write this I see her before me. What an honor it was to have met her.

There are so many reasons to admire Laura Gilpin. Although Laura Gilpin started photographing in her early teens when she decided to pursue photography as her life-long endeavor she asked advice from her mentor, Gertrude Käsebier, a renowned pictorialist photographer, as to where she could study. Käsebier recommended the Clarence White School of Photography in New York City. With this recommendation, Gilpin headed to New York in 1916 to study with Clarence H. White. The Pictorialists placed great emphasis on the evocation of mood rather than on detail and favored the soft delicate grays and texture of platinum printing papers. Returning to Colorado Springs in 1918, Gilpin worked in platinum with large format cameras. Her prints of Mesa Verde and her surroundings in Colorado Springs suggest as much about the emotion she felt upon viewing the scene as about the subject itself.



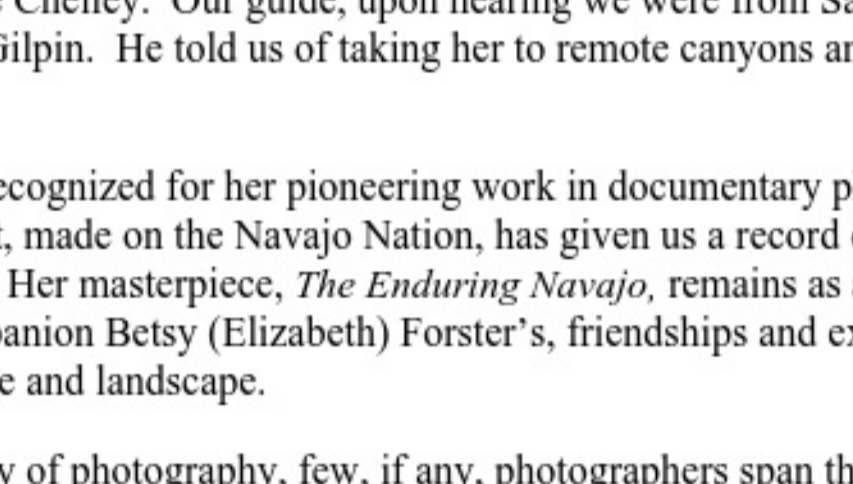
Laura Gilpin (1891 - 1979)  
*The Corn Grinding Song,*  
Mesa Verde National Park, 1925  
Vintage platinum print



Laura Gilpin (1891 - 1979)  
*The House of the Cliff Dweller,*  
Mesa Verde National Park, 1925  
Vintage platinum print

Laura learned lessons at the Clarence White School that would stay with her for the rest of her life, especially her love and mastery of platinum printing, or other ways of printing, photogravure, soft silver papers, that maintained that look and feelings of Pictorialism. Her strong foundation of design was also formed here.

Upon returning to the Southwest as a "pictorialist" she soon realized that the subject matter called for a more direct and "clear" approach.



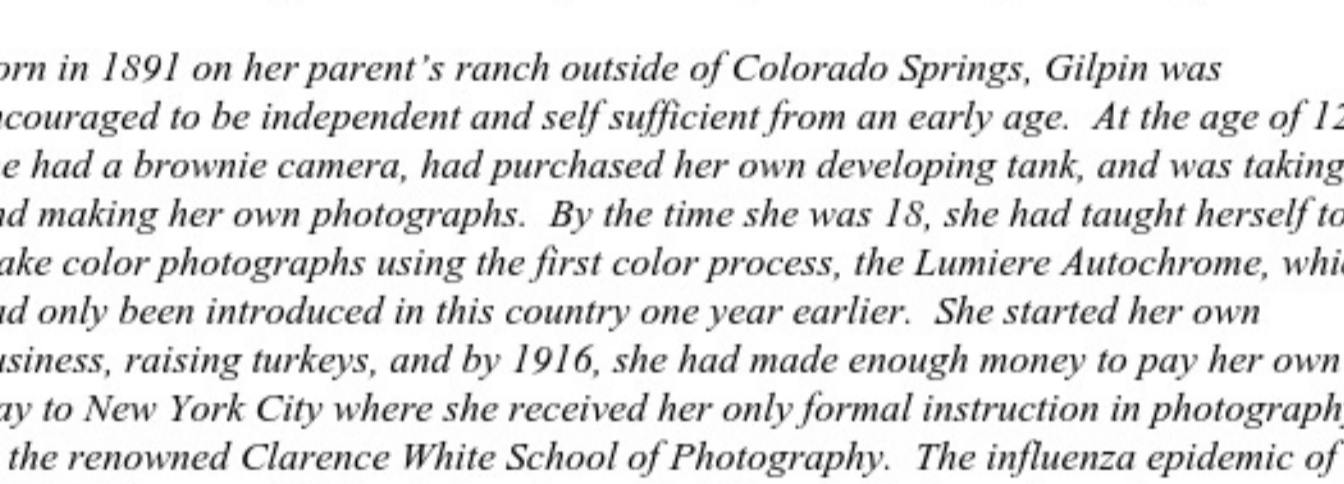
Laura Gilpin (1891 - 1979)  
*The Little Medicine Man,* 1932  
Platinum print

Another reason is the mastery she attained in landscape photography. Her landscape interpretations of the Southwest are exquisite for their sheer visual impact and the technical prowess executed in her printing. So many of her landscapes have become icons within this genre, whether the photographs were made from a tripod, handheld, or from the air. No physical barrier, either geological or physical, would deter her.

Soon after we opened our gallery on Guadalupe Street, we started getting visits from people who worked with Laura. One gentleman that stands out was her pilot. He told endless stories of her daredevil actions hanging out of his plane to make photographs. He was amazed continuously that she never seemed scared or afraid to do what was necessary to "get her picture". We heard stories like this again when we took a family trip to Canyon de Chelly. Our guide, upon hearing we were from Santa Fe, asked if we knew Laura Gilpin. He told us of taking her to remote canyons and cliffs to make her photographs.

Laura Gilpin is recognized for her pioneering work in documentary photography. Her long-term project, made on the Navajo Nation, has given us a record of both the people and their culture. Her masterpiece, *The Enduring Navajo*, remains as a visual journal of her and her companion Betsy Forster's, friendships and experiences among the Navajo people and landscape.

Within the history of photography, few, if any, photographers span these three genres - Pictorialism, Straight Photography, and Documentary.



Laura Gilpin (1891 - 1979)  
*Storm from La Bajada,* 1946  
Gelatin silver print

In 2005, for our 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Exhibition, we proudly featured the photographs of Laura Gilpin. Our friend and Laura's close and trusted friend, and executor of her estate, Jerry Richardson wrote the following essay for our catalog:

*Laura Gilpin wished that there be only one word as her epitaph on her gravestone. That was "photographer". Although the pursuit of art and beauty was a lifelong passion, photography was the touchstone of her long and productive life, which defined the way she saw the world and her place in it. Her love of the wide-open spaces of the American West and her interest in the people, especially the native people who inhabited this land, provided the subject matter, which most inspired her life's work.*

*Born in 1891 on her parent's ranch outside of Colorado Springs, Gilpin was encouraged to be independent and self-sufficient from an early age. At the age of 12, she had a brownie camera, had purchased her own developing tank, and was taking and making her own photographs. By the time she was 18, she had taught herself to make color photographs using the first color process, the Lumiere Autochrome, which had only been introduced in this country one year earlier. She started her own business, raising turkeys, and by 1916, she had made enough money to pay her own way to New York City where she received her only formal instruction in photography, at the renowned Clarence White School of Photography. The influenza epidemic of 1918 left her gravely ill and she returned to Colorado Springs where she was nursed back to health by my great aunt, Betsy Forster, who headed the Visiting Nurse Association. So began a friendship that would anchor their lives together for more than fifty years.*

*Laura established a photography studio and small publishing house, managing to support herself on portrait and architectural photography and by printing and selling her own postcards and souvenir guides to regional sites such as Mesa Verde and Pike's Peak. Both women loved the western landscape and its backcountry. In the summers, Laura and Betsy would take of to explore the southwest, camping along the way while Laura recorded the beauty of the region with her 8 x 10" view camera. In 1931, during the depths of the Depression, Betsy gave up her job with the Visiting Nurse Association to become a field nurse at Red Rock Trading Post on the Navajo Reservation. The Navaho people came to love and trust Betsy, who unlike most non-Indians of the time encouraged the Navaho to practice their own native medicine alongside the western medicine she practiced. When Laura visited Betsy and accompanied her on medical visits, the Navaho gave Betsy's friend uncommon permission to photograph them in their daily lives. Although Betsy was forced to return to Colorado Springs when the private funding for her job ran out, these photographs, along with others taken over the next 30 years, became the basis for Gilpin's most well known book, *The Enduring Navaho*.*

*In 1946, Laura and Betsy moved to Santa Fe to be closer to the region and the people they had come to love so much. The year before, Laura had begun a new project, photographing the Rio Grande from source to mouth. Because of the war, gasoline was rationed and film was in short supply, requiring Gilpin to limit herself to one shot for each image she sought. Even so, she produced a remarkable photographic record of the river and the region, *The Rio Grande, River of Destiny*, in 1949.*

*As it is for many artists, life in Santa Fe was financially difficult. Laura was too humble to promote herself and her work, and photography was not yet regarded as fine art worthy of collecting. Betsy had become incapacitated by polio. Laura somehow managed to support and care for herself and Betsy on her photography. Undaunted, she continued to photograph the region and its people and to become a part of the Santa Fe community which supported the arts and Native American people and their cultures. Betsy died in 1972. Even though she was 81 and quite handicapped herself by arthritis and the infirmities of age, Laura launched herself on a new project to produce a book on the Canyon de Chelly and the Navaho who lived there. At the same time, there was a new appreciation of photography and Laura's work began to receive the recognition it deserved. Laura was delighted that her work was now appreciated and grateful for the financial security she had not previously enjoyed. She happily took the time to give encouragement and critical advice to the many young photographers who called upon her. When she died in 1979 at the age of 88, she was still at work on the Canyon de Chelly book.*

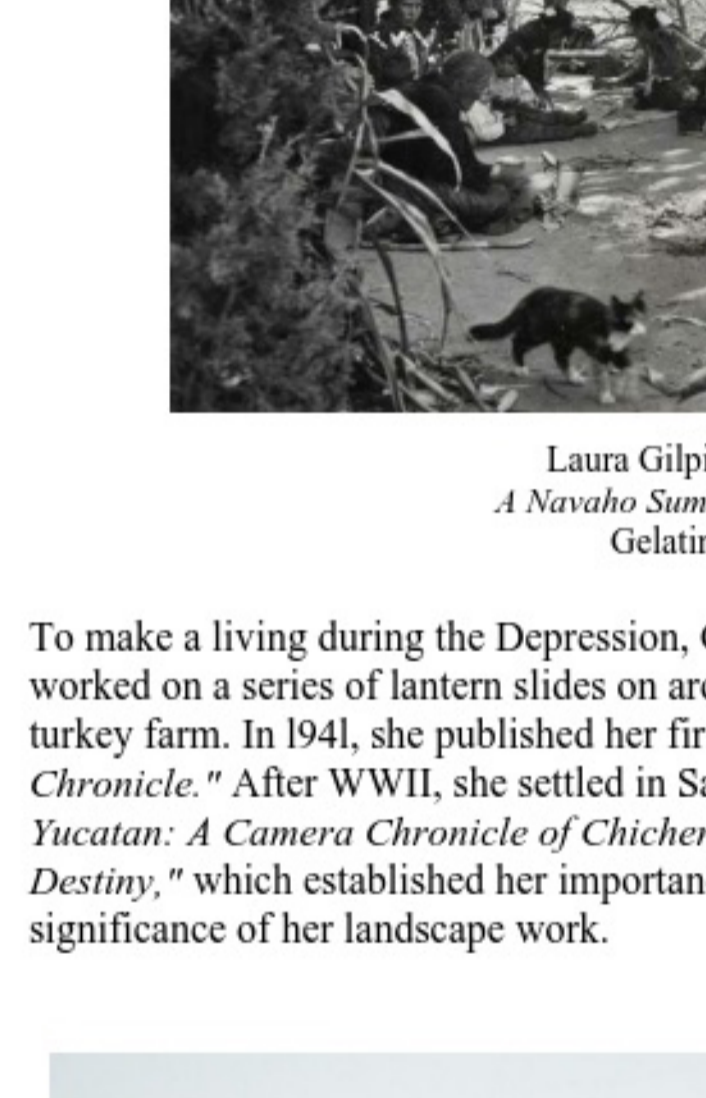
*Laura Gilpin was a woman of indomitable spirit and courage. It was these qualities that enabled her to pursue her work as a photographer, despite both financial and personal hardships, for over sixty years. The thing she was most proud of at the end of her life was that she had always managed to support herself following her life's passion, photography. And for anyone, and especially a woman of her time, that was truly a remarkable accomplishment.*



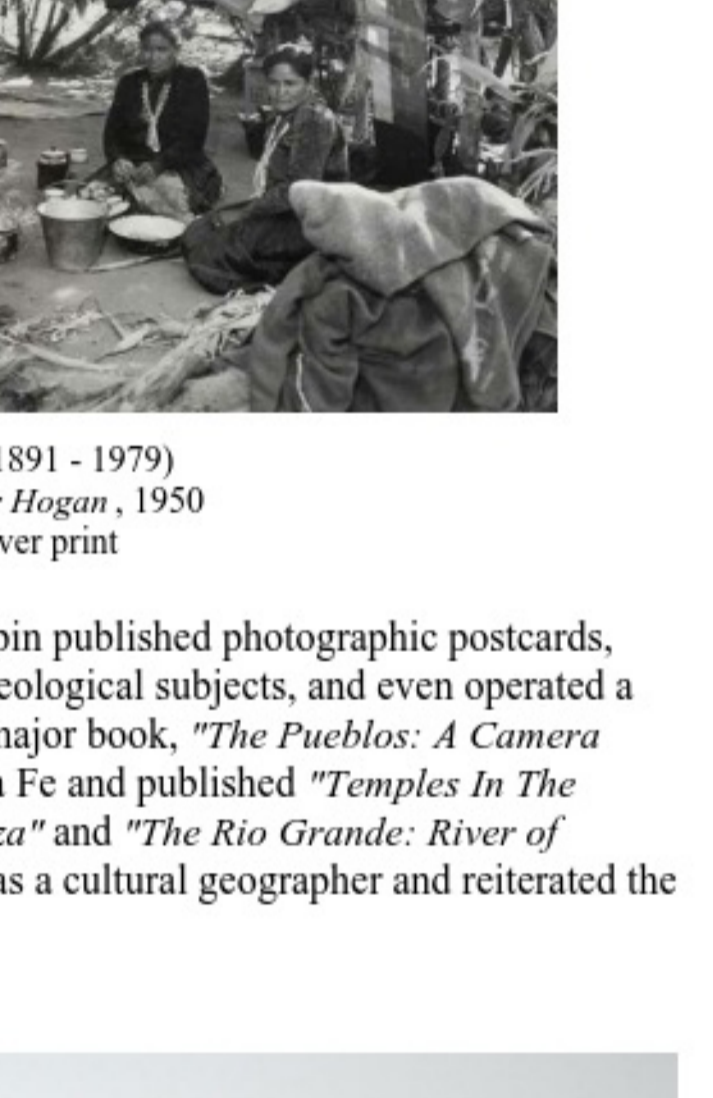
Laura Gilpin (1891 - 1979)  
*The Potters of San Ildefonso,* 1925  
Gelatin silver print

Laura Gilpin became increasingly interested in the history and archaeology of the region and she began photographing the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico and their ancient ruins. Gilpin's long-term involvement with the Navajo began in 1930 when she and her companion, Elizabeth Forster, ran out of gasoline in a remote section of the Navajo reservation. Gilpin's early Navajo pictures differed markedly from her work with the Pueblos. While the Pueblo work depicted her Indian subjects as generalized types, these pictures portrayed particular individuals.

In 1950, she went back to the Navajo Reservation and re-photographed many of her previous subjects for her 1968 book, *"The Enduring Navajo."*



Laura Gilpin (1891 - 1979)  
*A Navajo Family,* 1950  
Gelatin silver print



Laura Gilpin (1891 - 1979)  
*The Covered Wagon,* 1934  
Gelatin silver print



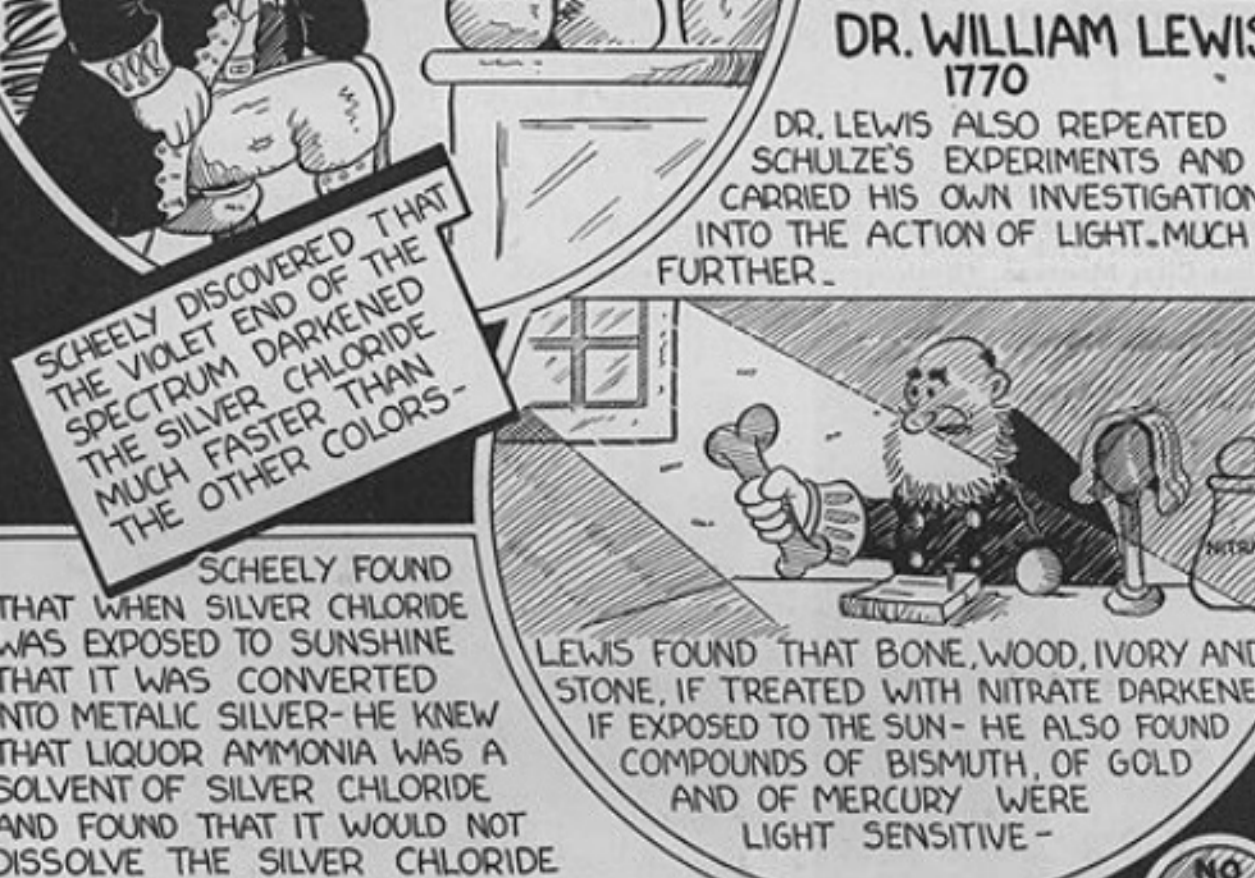
Laura Gilpin (1891 - 1979)  
*A Navaho Summer Hogan,* 1950  
Gelatin silver print

To make a living during the Depression, Gilpin published photographic postcards, worked on a series of lantern slides on archaeological subjects, and even operated a turkey farm. In 1941, she published her first major book, *"The Pueblos: A Camera Chronicle."* After WWII, she settled in Santa Fe and published *"Temples In The Yucatan: A Camera Chronicle of Chichen Itza"* and *"The Rio Grande: River of Destiny,"* which established her importance as a cultural geographer and reiterated the significance of her landscape work.



Beaumont Newhall taught both the History of Photography and Curatorial Methods at the University of New Mexico. The curating students, while working on exhibitions, would accompany Beaumont to artist's studios to meet them and talk about their work. As was Beaumont's way, making things personal for his students was both educational and key to understanding artists' work and methodology. We still receive emails today from Beaumont's former students about the day Ansel Adams popped into their class, or Brett Weston, or any number of others. Beaumont loved the time when he brought his class to meet Laura Gilpin for her demonstration of Platinum printing, which is depicted in today's video. By the way, that is Nick Nixon who is assisting Laura.

Also mentioned in today's video is Eleanor Caponigro talking about how much Laura loved receiving visits by young photographers. I was one of those young photographers, and that day, in 1978, remains with me and helped shape me as a person and photographer.



**The Illustrated History of Photograph by Bud Sagendorf**

As an added feature to our weekly newsletters, we are posting copies of a History of Photography comic strip. Inspired by Beaumont Newhall's 1937 groundbreaking exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the catalog for the exhibition which when expanded became Beaumont's *The History of Photography*. Forrest Sagendorf who was better known as Bud Sagendorf created a weekly strip in 1938 using Beaumont's text as his guide. Sagendorf was a photography enthusiast and Beaumont loved the comic strip. The weekly comics are a fun and accurate introduction to the early processes and practitioners of photography. I'm sure some of you will recognize his drawing style from his Popeye comics.



Next week we are taking off for a "staycation" and will return in August.

We again want to thank you for the feedback. Your emails and calls mean the world to us and continue to motivate. We have had some wonderful responses.

Many of you have also asked about accessing our previous emails. We have added a new page on our website entitled ["History of Photography"](#). All our past and future weekly mailings will be located there for viewing. Please feel free to share them and encourage interested parties to join our mailing list under ["contact"](#).

Thank you, please stay safe, healthy, productive, and involved.

Laura Gilpin photographs: Copyright 1979, Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, Bequest of Laura Gilpin

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