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## *The Awe of the Arctic: A Visual History*

Edited by Elizabeth Cronin

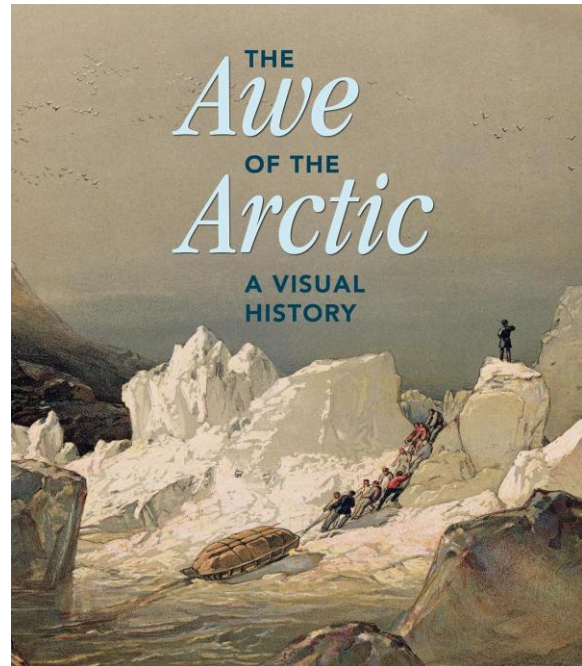
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Reviewed by: Katherine Manthorne

It's a pity we don't whistle at one another, like birds. Words are misleading. I am always trying to forget words. That is why I contemplate the lilies of the field, but in particular the glacier. If one looks at the glacier for long enough, words cease to have any meaning on God's earth.

—Halldór Laxness, *Under the Glacier* (1968)

*The Awe of the Arctic* is an exciting, original, and extremely handsome volume showcasing the pictorial record of the Polar North created over the past five hundred years. It was spearheaded by Elizabeth Cronin, the Robert B. Menschel Curator of Photography at the New York Public Library, who is its editor and a contributor. It accompanied an exhibition of the same name on display at the library from March 15 through July 13, 2024, but stands on its own as a book. Taking as its mantra the above quotation from Icelandic Nobel laureate Halldór Laxness, it is literally—as the subtitle proclaims—*a visual history*. Its 258 pages put the emphasis squarely on pictorial documents, often reproduced as full- or double-page spreads (with an occasional fold-out). It provides what Cronin calls “a diachronic look” at “the myriad ways in which the Arctic has been visually portrayed,” including a wide spectrum of pictorial material—from maps and travel narrative illustrations to photographs and fine art—most of them culled from the library’s collection (9, 8, respectively).



Geographically, most scientists define the Arctic as the area within the Arctic Circle, a line of latitude about 66.5 degrees north of the Equator. Within this circle are the basin of the Arctic Ocean and the northern parts of Scandinavia, Russia, Canada, Greenland, and the US state of Alaska. Almost entirely covered by water—much of it frozen—it is constantly moving and changing, a faraway place that most of us experience only as armchair travelers. With a rather spare text, *The Awe of the Arctic* invites us simply to look. As it

turns out, however, looking at the enormous and multifaceted visual history of the Arctic is not so simple.

Fifteen short, smart essays—authored by experts in a range of fields—are arranged loosely chronologically to guide us through this visual panorama. The initial essay by Ian Fowler opens with a map: Gerhard Mercator’s (Flemish, 1512–1594) *Septentrionalium terrarum descriptio* from 1595, described as “the first individually issued (and arguably the most important) map of the Arctic” (10). Next Madeleine C. Viljoen analyzes the local population with her contribution, “The Arctic Peoples in the Early Modern Book,” tracking how, by the mid-eighteenth century, the practices of anthropological scholarship shifted from copying depictions of inhabitants from previous accounts to eyewitness drawings. Kyle R. Triplett’s text locates an article from the first newspaper created on a ship during a British polar expedition in 1819–20 that provides glimpses into the everyday life of the crew on these dangerous early missions. Elizabeth C. Denlinger’s essay looks at two publications by female authors in 1818: Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Eleanor Anne Porden’s lesser-known *Arctic Expeditions*, both of which open with a journey north. No history of this frozen realm would be complete without an account of Sir John Franklin’s doomed expedition that set sail from London in 1845, provided here by Declan Kiely. In her essay, “Feeble and Heroic,” Elizabeth Cronin offers a rich interpretation of “the fantastical Arctic landscape” that culminates with an analysis of the 1860–61 expedition led by Isaac Hayes, who overcame challenges of freezing temperatures, stormy weather, and a rocking vessel to take the first successful wet-plate photographs of the region. Photographs were also made by British explorer Frederick George Jackson, including an especially striking five-page fold-out panorama of Cape Flora contextualized by Jessica Keister.

The North Pole was the goal for all these intrepid individuals, some of whom, as Joseph J. Vissers narrates, even resorted to hot-air balloons as means of travel. By 1900, much of the globe had been explored and mapped, as Julie Golia writes in her piece, but adventurers like Agnes Deans Cameron sought what she called “the ultimate frontier,” which Cameron went on to describe in her book *The New North: Being Some Account of a Woman’s Journey through Canada and the Arctic* (1910). Maggie Mustard delves into the thorny question of how expensive Arctic travel was funded and gives the example of Robert Peary, who mounted lectures with magic lanterns to shape public opinion and woo financial backers. Emily Walz discusses how far-flung places and heroic explorers also made for good advertising, as seen in the trading cards of the American Tobacco Company. Within this polar arena of international science and exploration, the Soviets too made their mark, as Bogdan Horbal demonstrates in his contribution. Cronin and Maggie Mustard author one of the final segments on contemporary artists whose concerns embrace the colonialist past, climate change, and Indigenous inhabitants who, until recently, have been treated as subjects but not makers. Dalila Scruggs illuminates Terry Adkins’s 2011 work referencing Black explorer Matthew Henson, whose contribution to seven of Peary’s voyages went unrecognized until Adkins brought him out from behind Peary’s shadow. This survey is just the tip of the iceberg (pun intended) of the stunning visuals and scholarly insight of the catalogue.

Multiple themes cut across a half-millennium of visual history, but here I would like to identify three larger ideas that express the extreme difficulty of capturing the region’s rich complexity in static images. The first concerns an emphasis on the directed gaze. Within the plethora of haunting pictures produced in a wide range of media, many call specific

attention to the importance of looking: figures point, offer us a view over their shoulders, make sketches and photographs, and use optical aids so necessary in these forbidding and rapidly changing spaces. The foreign explorers engaged in these various acts of looking represent a one-sided colonial gaze, viewing the Arctic as an empty space from which the Indigenous inhabitants have been erased. Especially intriguing is Sir John Ross's hand-colored aquatint *First Communication with the Natives of Price Regents Bay* (1819), in which a member of the British exploring party has offered a Native man a mirror, and he is pictured as amazed to see his own likeness reflected against the scenery behind him (52–53). In the print *Comr. Ross Planting the British Standard on the True Position of the Magnetic Pole*, a man peers through a telescope at the brilliant stars in the night sky that provide a backdrop to the raising of the flag (63). Sir Allen William Young's print *Ice Barrier across Peel Strait* pictures a photographer who has ducked his head under the cloth of a box camera that he has positioned precariously close to a crevasse (130). Peary produced photographs that were later deployed as hand-colored magic lantern slides (164–67). Perhaps most surprisingly, given how few women explored the Arctic, we find the likeness of Léonie d'Aunet inserted among the crew of a French expedition of 1838, the results of which were published in *Voyage de la Commission scientifique du nord Scandinavie, en Laponie, au Spitzberg et aux Feröe* (1842–55). She appears in Louis Bévalet's illustration *Vue Prise dans la baie de Smeremberg Spitzberg* wearing a long skirt, coat, and jaunty hat and standing between two male members of the party, who link arms to ensure her safety as they point to distinctive features of a nearby glacier (66–67). Just in front of them, two seated men are busy sketching their surroundings, presumably her fiancé, François-Auguste Biard, the official artist of the group, along with his assistant. These motifs referencing the scopic regime call attention to this sublime ice-bound landscape and the impossibility of capturing it adequately.

A second pervasive theme, as suggested by the participation of the young, unmarried woman in the French expedition, is the surprising degree of diversity among the explorers in the region, far more than is generally believed. While the vast majority of explorers were white male Europeans, the volume stresses that the explorers included women, representatives of many Euro-American nations, men of color such as Matthew Henson, and Indigenous people. Léonie d'Aune wrote what became a best-selling book about her experiences entitled *Voyage d'une femme au Spitzberg* (1855), and Cameron did the same in 1910. Both emphasized the novelty of being a female traveler to the region (68–69; 156–57). The involvement of women in images of the Arctic continues with the twenty-first-century artist Scarlett Hooft Graafland, who has pursued an ecological engagement with the landscape, its animals, and its people via her dreamlike photographs of caribou antlers on pale blue-green ice (195–97).

The third theme that struck me in the catalogue is Indigeneity and the legacy of colonialism. The historic material that is the centerpiece of the book shows strong evidence of a colonizing perspective, but the discussion of those issues is largely absent from the essays (although it did appear on the exhibition labels). The selected images omit much of the twentieth century to focus on very recent work (180–241). All these contemporary artists who are Indigenous or have Indigenous ancestry were asked how they wanted to self-identify regarding their nationality. Here is a sampling of the artists represented. Since Kiliiii Yüyan is not allowed in his ancestral home of Siberian China, he decided to photograph the Inupiat, a community with similar practices. His images, ranging

from whale hunting to preserving blubber, demonstrate their subsistence culture. Greenlander Julie Edel Hardenber's video, with her 360-degree views accompanied by voiceover, counters the stereotype of an arctic wilderness with the complexity of a modern society with a colonialist past. Minik Bidstrup's digital slide show juxtaposes his photographs with those of John Møller (1867–1935)—the first Greenlander to work as a photographer—to reveal the role of colonizers. Inuuteq Storch's photobook *Keepers of the Ocean* expresses how the oceans and weather control life in his native Sisimiut, Greenland. Sàmi Outi Pieski's lithograph *On the Top* depicts the traditional Sàmi hat, which serves as a marker of identity.

It is important to recognize, too, that this book complemented an exhibition that included text labels for each object that elaborated further the Indigenous presence. It is, however, important to bear in mind that the exhibition drew almost exclusively from the holdings of the New York Public Library. Quite a few of the works included were created on Svalbard, which has no Indigenous population. Even acknowledging the depth and richness of the library's collection, it, like any institution, has gaps that impact full development of any given theme. Although more material in the volume could have addressed Indigenous makers, the organizers are to be applauded for excavating so much incredible material and forging a path for future researchers to continue pursuing.

The Inuit named those who came to explore the Arctic “the people who change nature” (7). The Indigenous population understood that even if unintended, exploitation followed in the wake of these intruders who depleted their resources and disturbed the order of things. *The Awe of the Arctic* urges us to look long and hard at the images of this fragile realm created over half a millennium and to ponder a better future for this compromised ecosystem and for our planet.

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