



# PICTURING CHINATOWN

*Art and Orientalism  
in San Francisco*

Anthony W. Lee



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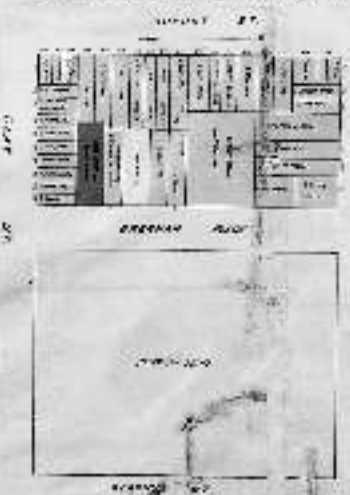
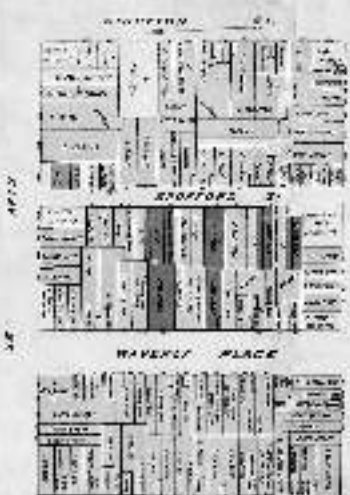
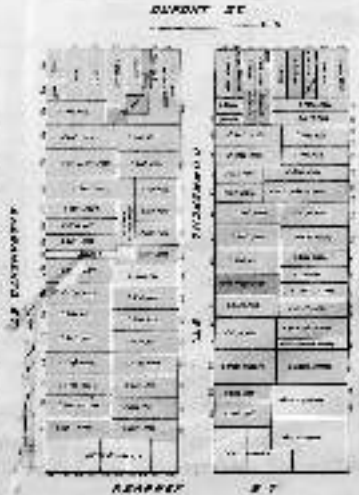
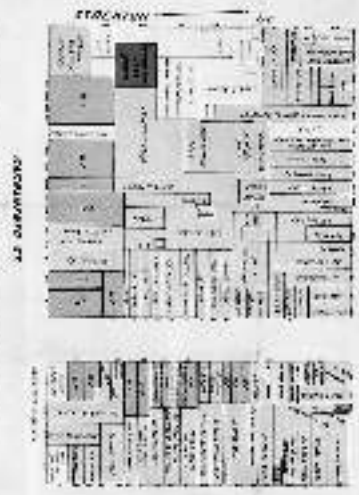
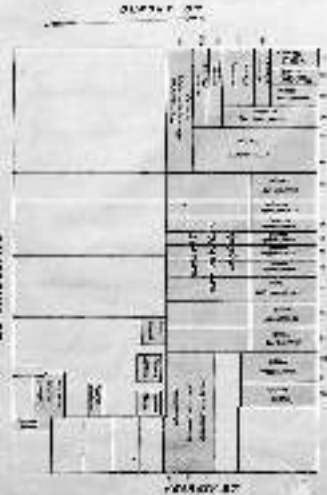
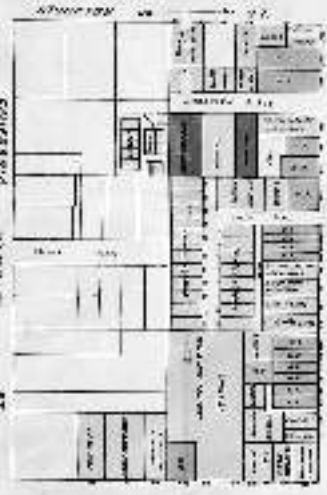
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**Official Map  
of  
San Francisco**

*Handwritten notes:*  
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- 1. City and County of San Francisco
- 2. City and County of Alameda
- 3. City and County of Contra Costa
- 4. City and County of Inyo
- 5. City and County of Nevada
- 6. City and County of Placer
- 7. City and County of Sutter
- 8. City and County of Yuba

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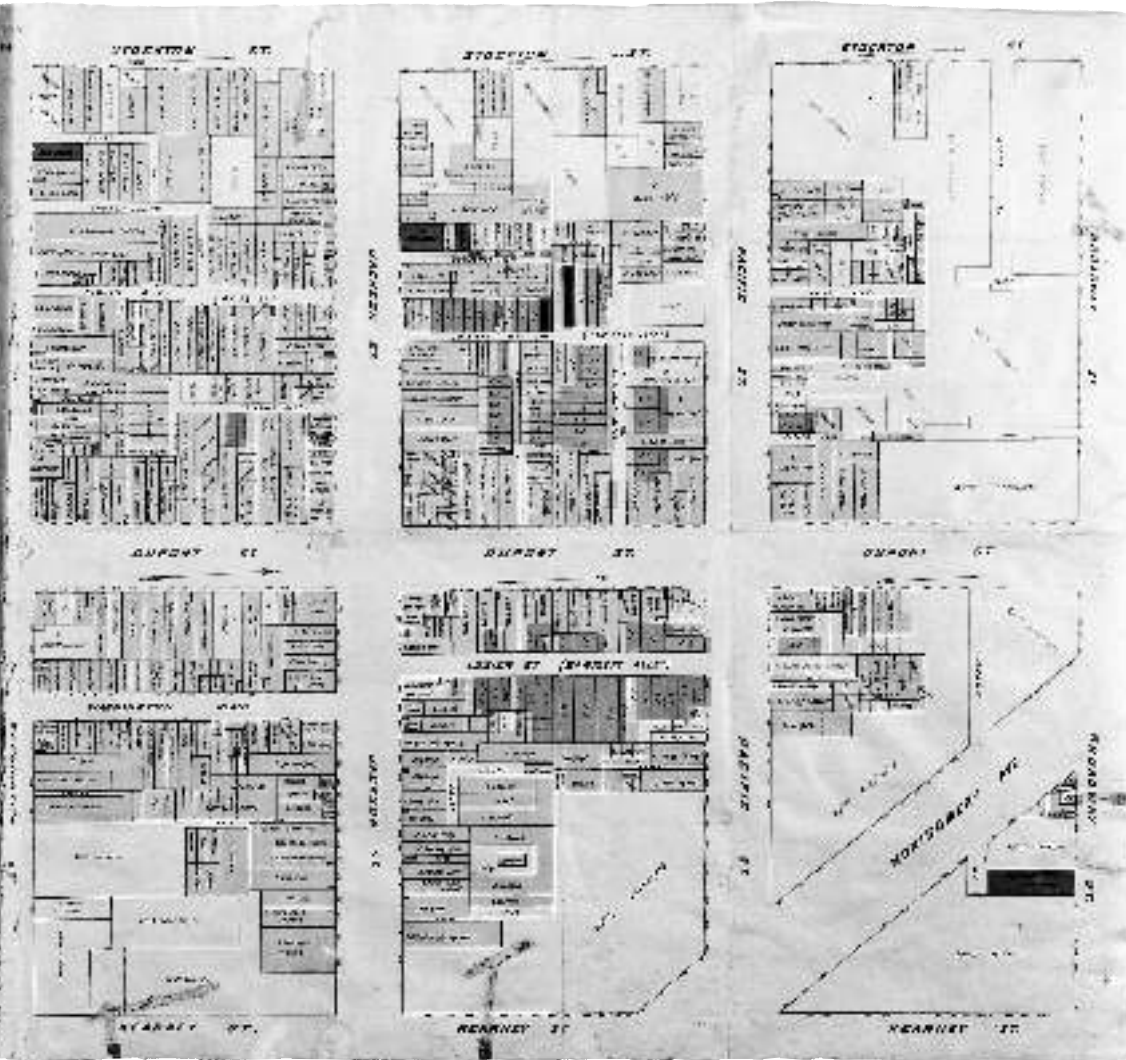


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*Art and Orientalism in San Francisco*

Anthony W. Lee



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## INTRODUCTION

In her famous account of her conversion to documentary photography, Dorothea Lange remembered observing the depressing life on the streets from her studio window and suddenly feeling the need to take the camera off its tripod and down to the scene below. It happened one day in San Francisco in 1933:

I remember well standing at that one window and just watching the flow of life. Up from the waterfront it came to that particular corner, that junction of many different things. There was the financial district to the left, Chinatown straight ahead, and the Barbary Coast and the Italian town. The unemployed would drift up there, would stop, and I could just see they did not know where next. . . . The studio room was one flight up and I looked down as long as I could and then one day I said to myself, "I'd better make this happen," and that started me. I made a print and put it on the wall to see what reaction I would get, and I remember well the customary, common reaction was, "Yes, but what are you going to do with it?" I hadn't the slightest idea. . . . Things are very often apt to be regarded as a vehicle for making a name for yourself. But the way it happened with me, I was compelled to photograph as a direct response to what was around me.<sup>1</sup>

The picture she shot and put on her wall, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco* (fig. I.1), is now equally famous. She had wandered down to the waterfront and stood behind the mass of unemployed men who "did not know where next," and she captured something of the aimlessness she saw in them, in the sea of hats and the line of broad, flat shoulders. Although she professed that the picture was not an attempt to make her reputation, in fact it quickly did just that. In most accounts of her life and work, *White Angel Breadline, San Francisco* is a dramatic turning point: it changed Lange from an un-



I.1 Dorothea Lange, *White Angel Breadline*, San Francisco, 1933.  
The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of  
California, City of Oakland, Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

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known society portraitist with a modest but busy studio on Montgomery Street into a recognized, celebrated photographer who devoted her work to liberal-reformist political and social programs.

As I say, this account of origins is famous, but it comes at a cost. It erases important biographical and social-historical detail. There is, for example, no mention of Lange's teacher, Arnold Genthe, from whom she had learned not only society portraiture but also much of what she knew about street photography. Three decades earlier, Genthe had walked the very same streets in San Francisco and turned his camera onto its flowing life. Lange had only recently helped reprint Genthe's street work from the original glass plates (and may even have accompanied him on his own return trip to San Francisco's streets in the late 1920s). Nor did Lange mention perhaps the most recognized precursor to a socially minded photography, Jacob Riis, whose work she surely knew. Riis's famous *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) had been a national best-seller, and Riis himself, until his death in 1914, had gone on speaking tours with his lantern slides of the New York poor in an effort to bring attention to their plight. A whole tradition of documentary-style photography had issued from him, developing in several permutations throughout the Progressive Era in work as varied as Lewis Hine's *Pittsburgh Survey* and Robert W. De Forest and Lawrence Veiller's *Tenement House Problem* (1903).<sup>2</sup> Lange, however, felt the street corner and its sad life rush in on her sensibilities all at once, and she was compelled to respond. There was no time to ruminate on a tradition of urban photography that might have informed her about what and how to photograph, or to think that photography, especially of a documentary sort, might have a set of conventions. What mattered most to her was the directness of her work, prompted by the appearance of the drifting unemployed. "I'm not aware photographically of having been influenced by anyone," she later told an interviewer.<sup>3</sup>

While there is no acknowledgment of photographic precedent, there is also no acknowledgment of a larger context in which to judge the Depression's worst effects. For if Lange was interested in the unemployed men who came to that street corner, she omitted, or was relatively unaware of, the people already living there in poverty. She certainly knew that they existed, as an earlier picture, *San Francisco Chinatown* (fig. I.2), taken from her studio window, suggests. In the street below, Chinese children, led by an elegantly dressed woman, march straight ahead toward their home in the heart of Chinatown. The streets are empty except for the woman and her charges—no cars on the road, no suggestion of unemployed men, no sense of alienation or aimlessness. By 1924, when the picture was taken, the Chinese American working classes had been feeling the sting of intense economic and political discrimination for nearly



I.2 Dorothea Lange, *San Francisco Chinatown*, 1924. The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland, Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

forty years. That year, the passage of yet another immigration act legally halted any further immigration and naturalization of the Chinese, in effect condemning Chinatown's existing working classes to slow suffocation. But Chinatown's inhabitants did not at first inspire a sense of social commitment in Lange. From the window above, the population in the streets below was merely a diversion from, or perhaps a complement to, her portrait work. She was especially interested in the children on whom so many painters and photographers had concentrated, transforming them into a veritable industry of genre scenes (fig. I.3). She occasionally spotted them on roofs and balconies opposite the studio and pointed the camera their way (fig. I.4). But she did not think that Chinatown had other subjects worth venturing out to capture. Only



I.3 Unknown photographer, *Chinese Children, Holiday Attire*, ca. 1900–1910. Courtesy of the Oakland Museum of California.

when the white working classes began to surge up from the stilled waterfront to crowd what was in fact the eastern edge of Chinatown did Lange feel the depth of economic and social deprivation behind the rows of drying laundry.

The narrative of Lange's turn to documentary work thus describes not only her conversion but also its historicity, in which the people of Chinatown did not at first signify. Furthermore, it suggests that the two omissions in her account—of photographic precedents and Chinatown's inhabitants—might actually be related. For in refusing to acknowledge that urban street pictures had their own photographic, even aesthetic conventions, Lange tacitly left the people of Chinatown virtually invisible except in highly conventionalized forms. It was initially difficult for her to think about



I.4 Dorothea Lange, *San Francisco Chinatown*, 1924. The Dorothea Lange Collection, Oakland Museum of California, City of Oakland, Gift of Paul S. Taylor.

the Chinese *outside* the aestheticized structure by which they had previously been pictured. Even in 1933 Chinatown was usually a setting for the dramas of someone else's life. It gained human significance when others—notably the white working classes, on the one hand, and photographers and painters, on the other—came to it in an attempt to find direction.

The role of San Francisco's Chinatown in the imaginations of photographers and painters had been nearly a century in the making, and Lange was only the latest of its

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visitors who brought with them social and aesthetic assumptions about the place and its people. This book follows the course of that history of imaginings, from the quarter's beginnings around 1850 to a century later, around 1950, when the existing harsh immigration and exclusion laws were being repealed and Chinatown's population was slowly obtaining something verging on recognition of a legitimate place in the social order. The chapters are best described as a series of case studies, each devoted to the works of particular artists who, it seems to me, best exemplify the issues at stake in representing Chinatown: Chinese competition in the labor market, for example, or the strange "bachelor societies" that offered to other San Franciscans an entirely different sense of how men formed a community, or the development of tourism as the quarter's major industry. The artists are equally varied: some born and raised in San Francisco, others sojourners like the early Chinese themselves. Some are relatively familiar to any casual observer of California art: Genthe, the early survey photographer Carleton Watkins, the Bohemian Club painter Theodore Wores, and so on. Others are today more obscure: the journalist and photographer Louis Stellman, the late-nineteenth-century painter Edwin Deakin, the early studio photographer Isaiah West Taber, and others.

As this brief rundown of names suggests, most of the artists were not Chinese or Chinese Americans. With few (but important) exceptions—the radical painter Yun Gee and his Chinese Revolutionary Artists' Club, or the performers at the Forbidden City—this book has precious little to say about the representations of Chinatown by its actual inhabitants. My main concern is to describe how these paintings and photographs attempted to produce a suitable image of Chinatown and its population for those who lived elsewhere. What counted as "suitable" depended on the historical meanings attributed to racial and cultural difference. And so my tasks also include establishing more precisely what those meanings were, deciding how they were in dialogue with important political and social developments both inside and outside Chinatown, and suggesting how the paintings and photographs inflected and were in turn inflected by them.

"Desire" and "difference" are the two organizing motifs in the case studies. The words usually have somewhat muddled senses: for desire, the palpable, often intense longing or craving (sometimes invidious) for a person, place, or thing; for difference, the means and markers to distinguish those people, places, or things. The two words depend on each other for their force and meaning. Where they take on more precision is in their historical manifestations—how they were articulated, how they drove the



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