



Anne Brigman (1897–1950)

by Elise Mackanych

Born in 1869 in Honolulu, Hawaii, Brigman was raised in a missionary family. While her upbringing was one of prayer and social custom, she wanted to escape these traditional confinements. When reflecting on her childhood, Brigman recalls “the ache in [her] legs for flight...[and]...the wild, wonderful need to stampede.”² She sought to fulfill this need, until she could finally attain it.

At the age of 16, her family moved to Northern California. She settled in Oakland, where she traveled often to Lake Tahoe and the surrounding wilderness of the Sierra Nevadas. These adventures led to radically creative endeavors and became the catalyst of many of her photos.

Brigman often went to explore Northern California’s wilderness and terrain. After reaching Sacramento by roadway, Brigman would then begin her solo treks without horse or map. Her experiences in the Sierras became the inspiration for her artwork. Little did she know, this inspiration would be revolutionary.

Continuously defying social norms, Brigman’s work is memorable for its scandalous subjects: nude female bodies. In a time where women were denied autonomy, encouraged to stay in the house, and shamed for being alone in nature, this photography was groundbreaking.

“I’ve dreamed of and loved to work with the human figure – to embody it in the rocks and trees, to make it part of the elements, not apart from them,”⁶ Brigman once said.

‘My pictures tell of my freedom of soul, of my emancipation from fear’, Brigman says. In her photo titled “The Breeze,” freedom is portrayed through a woman standing atop a cliff, as if she’s transcending from earth to the heavens. A lake lies among mountains in the background and the ethereal woman stands proudly above it all, surrounded by flowing fabrics. Her posture is tall and her poise is powerful, as if she is one with the strength of the mountains that lie before her.

Scholars believe Brigman to be the first woman in America to photograph her own nude body⁸. She was innovative for her subject matter, independence, and refusal of repressing societal norms.

While radical at the time, Brigman’s photography advocated for women to enjoy the exhilaration of the outdoors and an identity that gave them the freedom to do so. In a time when this was socially unclear, Brigman’s work demonstrates that unabashed femininity is powerful and worthy of the mountain peaks of Tahoe wilderness.

² “Anne Brigman; Visionary in Modern Photography.” NevadaArt.org. Accessed December 16, 2022. https://www.nevadaart.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2018_Brigman_TextPanels.pdf.

⁶ Kleinman, Rebecca. “A Pioneering Photographer, Bare in the Back Country.” The New York Times. The New York Times, December 26, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/26/arts/design/anne-brigman-nevada-sierra-steiglitz-okeeffe.html>.

⁸ Anne Brigman; Visionary in Modern Photography.” NevadaArt.org. Accessed December 16, 2022. https://www.nevadaart.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/2018_Brigman_TextPanels.pdf.