

# Projects : Panama Canal photographs by Ernest "Red" Hallen

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# Panama Canal Photographs by Ernest "Red" Hallen

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... much of our preoccupation with individual [photographs] is inherited from painting and the autographic arts and all of the approaches of specialization, the methodologies and handling, which went into that tradition. And there is something about that tradition which to my mind is not wholly in keeping with some of the predominant facts and characteristics of photography. . . . In fact, it seems to me characteristic of photography to think in terms of large quantities, three or four rolls at a time, images everywhere . . . new impressions quickly piled on the old, a generally accelerated flashing of exact instants, of which the refinements are secondary. . . .

—Paul Vanderbilt, Curator Emeritus, Wisconsin State Historical Society, from a lecture at the George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, August 21, 1967.

Ernest Hallen's achievement, to have photographed every aspect of the construction and maintenance of the Panama Canal for exactly 30 years, is exceeded in scope and dedication by few others: Edward S. Curtis' photographs of the North American Indian and August Sander's portraits of the German people are the only possible rivals. Hallen, born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1875, was 32 years old when he arrived in Panama in July 1907, after living 6 years in Puerto Rico and 2 years in Cuba. The great 51 mile-long canal, begun by the French in 1881, taken over by the United States in 1903, became Hallen's life work. As "Official Photographer" he recorded its evolution from all angles and in all seasons, year after year, until his retirement from government service in 1937. Later, he and his wife, Maude, and their two daughters moved to Monterey Park, California, where he died in 1947. All told, he made more than 16,000 photographs, creating a body of work almost as vast and as grand as the subject it documents.

Today Hallen's negatives are preserved in the offices of the Canal Zone Government in Balboa Heights. The National Archives in Washington, D.C., houses a large selection of modern prints from these negatives and a complete record of

the negatives on microfilm, the latter unfortunately of very poor quality. The finest collection of Hallen's work, a complete set of vintage Hallen prints bound in 45 volumes and once the property of George W. Goethals (the American military engineer who brought the great project into operation in 1914) is in the Library of the United States Military Academy in West Point, New York. Aside from a few prints belonging to his descendants, the only vintage Hallen prints known to me are two volumes containing 253 photographs purchased by The Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1971.

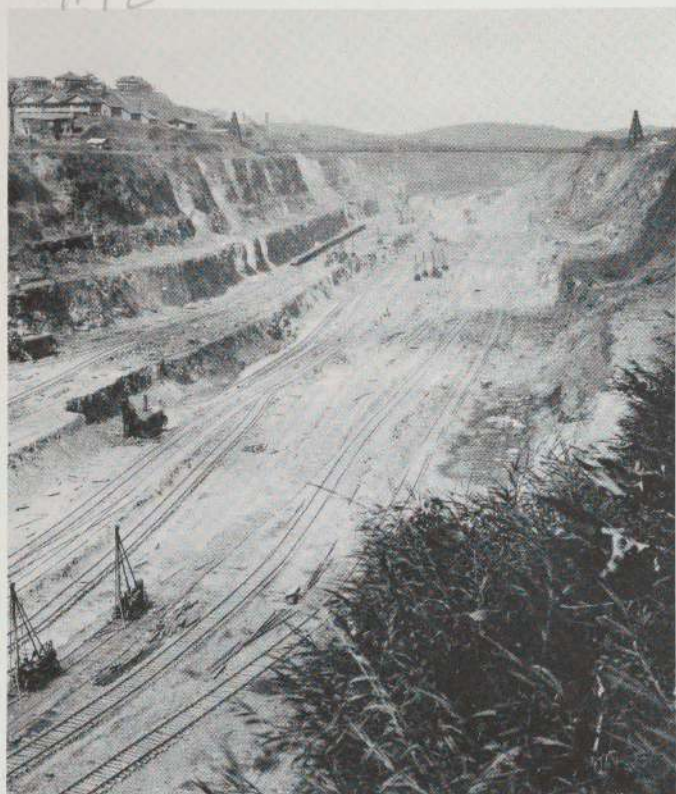
Implicit in collecting work of this kind is the question of how it should be looked at and thought about. Traditionally, photographs have entered the collections of art museums the same way the "autographic arts," to use Paul Vanderbilt's apt phrase, have entered: through a portal of concepts labeled "Masterpiece." An individual early work by Paul Strand, for example, is valued more for its relationship to examples of Cubist art works that preceded it than for its relationship to the real world from which it, as a photograph, was extracted. Yet, photographs of the magnificent stature of Strand's, whose essential meaning lies in a dramatic conquest of form, are very rare. And like Paul Vanderbilt, I sense that the blind application to all photographs of criteria derived from the very limited concept of the masterpiece is not appropriate.

The beauty inherent in many photographs resides in an incremental, cumulative layering of meaning grounded in the spatiotemporal world which we inhabit. The form this work takes—and Hallen's 30-year study of the Panama Canal is a superlative example—is that of overlapping images in coherent series rather than single pictures standing alone in splendid isolation. It may well be that significant bodies of such work are in their own, hitherto unrecognized, way as rare and valuable as the autographic masterpieces enshrined in museum collections and art history books. Perhaps, though, there are attics and archives bursting with material, like Hallen's, waiting to be assimilated back into the world from

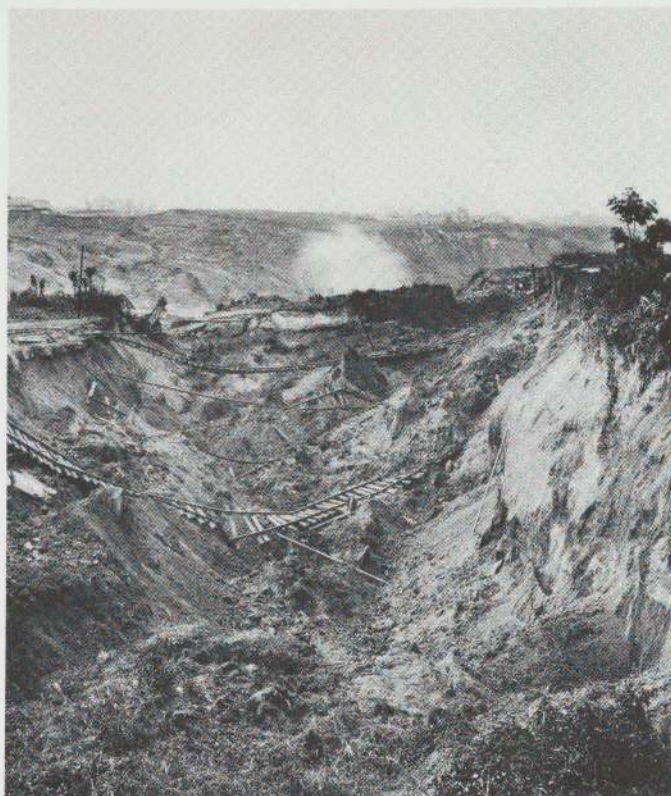


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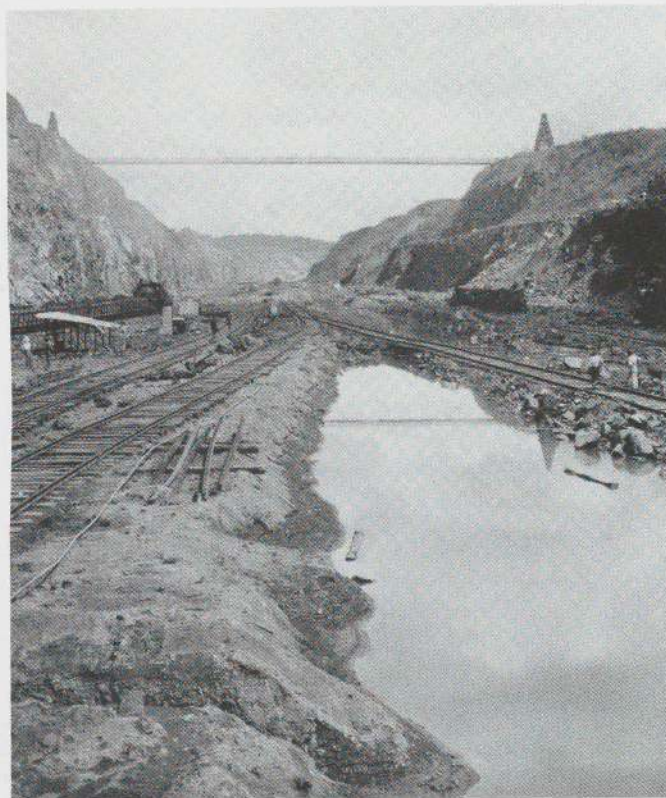
Culebra Cut. January 12, 1913.



Culebra Cut. Break in the East Bank between Stations 1746-1758. February 6, 1913.



Culebra Cut. Down to grade St. Sh. #222. May 20, 1913.



Culebra Cut. Looking north from  $\frac{1}{4}$  mile south of suspension bridge at Empire. June 16, 1913. All photos lent by U.S. Military Academy, West Point, New York.





Culebra Cut. Panama Canal. Sailing ship passing Gold Hill slide. Looking north. Jan. 24, 1915.

which it was taken. What form should this assimilation take?

To isolate only the few examples that happen, through either art or accident, to conform to the idea we hold of "Masterpiece" is an injustice. This has happened in virtually every exhibition of Curtis' Indian photographs, for example; the gravure prints are inevitably isolated behind glass with never a reference to the magnificent 40-volume text, *The North American Indian*, which they illustrate. The work of August Sander and Eugene Atget has suffered a similar debilitating aestheticization: vast bodies of intelligent and beautiful photographs are distilled down to a handful of art.

Obviously, should one wish, as I did, to exhibit photographs by Ernest Hallen, it would be physically impossible to show them all. But what one can do, I believe, is to show in depth one or another thematically coherent *stratum* from the body of the work; in the case of this summer's exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, *Projects: Panama Canal Photographs by Ernest "Red" Hallen*, photographs of the construction of the locks and the creation of the cut through the continental divide, the two factors that made the Canal possible, were chosen. That this approach can affect a genuine

aesthetic experience is suggested in the perceptive review N. F. Karlins wrote on the exhibition:

... Hallen's photographs most vividly reveal the immensity of the project and the difficulties involved in constructing the Panama Canal when they focus on one area and are viewed sequentially. The transformation of the environment becomes a magical process, in which mountains are moved and mammoth trenches cut. ... Progress on the excavation is counter-balanced by the growth of natural vegetation, and they are captured together by Hallen's camera. The processes, not just the object involved, are made visible. ...

—*East Side Express*, September 9, 1976, p. 13.

It is an insight into the problem that work like Hallen's presents us to note that the illustrations of it which grace these pages are, ironically, a perpetuation of the very concept of masterpiece which this essay has attempted to challenge. ■

**Dennis Longwell**, Assistant Curator, Department of Photography, Museum of Modern Art, is presently working on a book and exhibition of the early works of Edward Steichen, *Edward Steichen: The Master Prints, 1895-1914*.

