

The Museum of Modern Art

For Immediate Release
June 1987

WILLIAM RAU AND THE RAILROAD

July 2 - September 29, 1987

An exhibition of thirty turn-of-the-century photographs taken by William Rau (1855-1920) for the Pennsylvania and Lehigh Valley railroads opens at The Museum of Modern Art on July 2, 1987. Organized by Sarah Anne McNear, The Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Fellow in the Department of Photography, WILLIAM RAU AND THE RAILROAD explores the relationship that developed between early photography and the railroad.

William Rau was appointed the official photographer for the Pennsylvania Railroad in 1891 and the Lehigh Valley Railroad in 1895. Conceived as promotions for the railroads, the photographs included in this exhibition were intended to attract tourists by advertising the scenic wonders and physical comforts that could be enjoyed enroute. The photographer, well aware of the visual monotony and exhaustion that accompanied long distance train travel, depicted richly detailed scenes not usually visible from a fast moving express. His photographs were reproduced in summer excursion guides and displayed in train stations, resort hotels, and exhibition halls, including the landmark World's Columbian Exposition held in Chicago in 1893.

Using an 18 x 22" view camera, Rau worked in the tradition of large-format landscape photography frequently associated with the exploration of the American West. Unlike many photographers who documented the train's startling presence in a hostile environment, Rau sought to reconcile the machine and the eastern ideal of the pastoral landscape. His photographs placed less emphasis

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on the technological achievements of the railroads--which were familiar to travelers by 1890--than on the places that could be reached by them.

"Rau's photographs imply that a more languorous tour was possible," Ms. McNear writes. "The photographs not only depict the wildflowers growing immediately beside the tracks, they invite the traveler to explore the entire riverbank. They impel the tourist to leave the train in search of sights reached by the rails but not visible from them, and they allow him to examine the tracks and trestles beneath his train. By describing things that passengers might never see for themselves, Rau's photographs were not only an inducement to travel, but an accessory to the experience."

A native of Philadelphia, William Rau was trained by his father-in-law William Bell, an associate of Timothy O'Sullivan. As a young man, Rau was already an experienced traveler and landscape photographer, having accompanied in 1874 a U.S. government expedition around the world to record the transit of Venus. For the remainder of his life, he maintained a successful commercial studio in Philadelphia and operated a large mail-order trade in stereoscopic views and lantern slides.

WILLIAM RAU AND THE RAILROAD remains on view through September 29, 1987.

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For further information or photographic materials, contact the Department of Public Information, 212/708-9750.