

Exhibitions

Past Exhibitions

Shiprock and Mont St. Michel

Shiprock and Mont St.
Michel

Photographs by William Clift



Exhibition Details

Location: **Norton Gallery**
 Dates: **December 22, 2012
 to April 7, 2013**

Overview

"Begin with a vision:
 In the bay, an island...
 Or, begin with fire:
 A rock rises, folded forms..."
 -Paul Kane

"Prologue", a poem inspired by the photography of William Clift

An entire world away from each other, peoples came to two rocky centers of the spiritual, arising out of a wide plain of sea or desert floor. These seemingly unrelated places are Mont St. Michel, a tidal island in France, and Shiprock, a volcanic rock formation in northwestern New Mexico, the dual subjects of Phoenix Art Museum's exhibition of the photographic works of William Clift. Shiprock and Mont St. Michel: Photographs by William Clift opens December 22, on view through April 7, 2013 in Norton Family Photography Gallery. The exhibition is organized by Rebecca Senf, Curator of Photography, and will ultimately travel nationally and internationally.

William Clift, born in Boston in 1944, was a self-taught photographer whose 60 year career began at age 10. Clift's work is known for its clarity and intensity. He is considered a master of gelatin silver printing, and the products of his mastery are evident in this exhibition. Clift photographed Shiprock and Mont St. Michel over the course of four decades. He visited and photographed Shiprock for the first time in 1973. Shiprock is what is known as a monadnock, a Native American word for an isolated mountain or rock formation that arises abruptly from flat land surrounding it. The towering peak was once the central neck of a conical volcano that gradually eroded away, leaving only the rock formation ship-like behind. Located near the Four Corners, it is a sacred place for many indigenous peoples of the American Southwest, and plays a large role in the religious and mythological beliefs of the Navajo people in particular.

Photographs of Shiprock are combined with the haunting images of Mount St. Michel, a world away in France. Clift first photographed the Romanesque abbey over a six week period in 1977. The abbey, a sacred Christian place, is enshrouded in the lore and legend of pilgrimages and crusaders. With its soaring steeples and spires, the church mimics the same towering vertical lines as Shiprock. The site of Mont St. Michel is a magical place; it is an island, which ascends suddenly from a tidal bay, but at low tide the bay recedes, becoming a wide, flat plain of mud. There is a haunting, otherworldly quality to these dual monoliths, reaching heavenward from the low, surrounding plains. In Clift's photographs, diverse elements of the two places are highlighted: close-up details, silhouettes, shadows, distant views, the human presence. Sensitive seen and carefully printed, the resulting photographs are tender and subtle evocations of the places, while still conveying their power and strength. The images, primal yet ethereal, inspired a collection of poetry by noted American poet and Vassar College professor Paul Kane, which seeks to find language to describe the experience visiting these sites.

Kane begins his collection of poetry with the simple words: Begin with a vision. For visitors to this exhibition, beyond the history of Mont St. Michel, beyond the geological chronicle of Shiprock, perhaps the best way to experience these stunning works is to begin with sight. Legend holds that as relics bound for Mont St. Michel passed a blind woman, her sight was miraculously restored and she exclaimed: How beautiful it is to see. This sentiment echoes throughout the exhibition, rendering any viewer grateful for the chance to share in William Clift's remarkable vision.

Image Credits

William Clift (b. 1944), Photographs from Shiprock and Mont St. Michel. 1973-2010. © William Clift.

Exhibition Sponsors

This exhibition is organized by the Center of Creative Photography and Phoenix Art Museum and is sponsored by INFOCUS and the Maxine and Jonathan Marshall Endowment.

Phoenix Art Museum





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Hours

Monday – Closed
 Tuesday – 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.
 Wednesday – 10 a.m. - 9 p.m.
 Thursday – 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.
 Friday – 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.
 (First Friday: 10 a.m. - 10 p.m.)
 Saturday – 10 a.m. - 5 p.m.
 Sunday – 12 - 5 p.m.

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