

Izzy Kasdin
Catalogue Entry: Framed Photograph



Two Pueblo Indian Women with a white child, ca. 1890

Photograph in perforated tin and reverse-painted glass frame

(WA) WC064, X0030

Western Americana Collection

Department of Rare Books and Special Collections

Princeton University Library

“Two Pueblo Indian Women with a white child” is an 18 cm x 11 cm gelatin silver print of two Indian women, one standing and one sitting while holding a child. The title of the photograph identifies the child as white, which could suggest that these two women are the caretakers or nurses of the child, posing for a picture with him or her. The curtain with tassels that hangs behind the three subjects suggests that they sat for the photograph in a studio. The photograph is quite faded to warm yellow and brown tones. The photograph itself is mounted on a peach-colored card. The photograph and card sit behind the glass of a striking 34 cm x 27 cm frame. The frame is made of tin that forms thin piping around rectangles of glass, reverse-painted with a red and gold scalloped pattern tracing all four sides of each rectangle. In each of the four corners is a quarter circle of perforated tin. The tin is decorated with symmetrical patterns of dots. The back of the frame is entirely made of tin. A bundle of thin wires woven together and strung across the back of the frame suggests that it might have been hung on a wall. There is evidence of solder belying the method of production. Solder secures to the rest of the frame the tin sheet behind the photograph, making it difficult to remove the photograph without destroying the frame. This suggests that the photograph was placed in the frame during production and was

not switched later with a different photograph; the photograph and frame are probably from the same place and period. Princeton purchased this object from The Rainbow Man Gallery in Santa Fe, a gallery that specializes in Curtis photographs, Indian jewelry, and New Mexican folk art.¹

The library does not name a photographer or studio. Of all of the studio portraits in Princeton's Western Americana collection, the photograph in the frame bears a striking resemblance to the photographs labeled, "Cobb studio."² These photographs all have 18 cm x 11 cm dimensions and are mounted on peach-colored cards, like the framed photograph. The library identifies them all as gelatin silver prints and they display the same fading patterns as the framed photograph. The University of New Mexico's (UNM) digital photo archives has 49 photographs from the Cobb Studio, including a print identical to the photograph in the frame, confirming that it was indeed from William Cobb's studio.³ UNM dates the photograph to ca. 1900, not the Library's ca. 1890.

The frame itself probably came from not far outside of Albuquerque, where Cobb had his studio. In their comprehensive study of New Mexican tinwork, Lane Coulter and Maurice Dixon identify 14 different tinsmiths and workshops based on stylistic patterns. The "Isleta Tinsmith" undoubtedly made Princeton's frame, based on Coulter's description of his style and period of activity.⁴ Figure 5.81 in Coulter and Dixon's book has four quarter-circles of tin with a perforation pattern identical to the Princeton frame.⁵ This is common among the Isleta Tinsmith's frames; Coulter and Dixon suggest he worked off of a "set of standard templates."⁶ The Isleta Tinsmith was likely of Hispanic origins, which explains the Spanish influences in his work.⁷ Reverse glass painting was a European technique that Spain probably brought to the New World.⁸ Tinwork, too, was first a Mexican craft introduced to New Mexico by immigrants via the Rio Grande.⁹ Once in New Mexico, though, tinwork developed a unique American style, as the Isleta Tinsmith's work shows. For example, New Mexicans did not mine and so resorted to unique techniques for procuring raw materials. The craftsmen of the Southwest used re-purposed tin-cans as the material for their tinwork; starting in the late 1840s, the tin-cans of food brought along the Santa Fe Trail led to the growth of this unique method.¹⁰ The Isleta Tinsmith often "backed" his glass with the "interior of a can," which the flattened concentric circles on the back of the Princeton frame evidence.¹¹ Both reverse-painted glass and tinwork items were at first

¹ Izzy Kasdin, email message from Alfred Bush, January 12, 2012;

The Rainbow Man Orotone and Goldtone Gallery. <http://www.therainbowman.com/index.html>.

² "Isleta girls." Cobb Studio. ca. 1890. Western Americana Collection, (WA) WC064, M1913. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

"Isleta Squaw, No-Hi-Hi." Cobb Studio. ca. 1890. Western Americana Collection, (WA) WC064, M1911. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

"Three Isleta Indian women with baskets of pottery." Cobb Studio. ca. 1890. Western Americana Collection, (WA) WC064, M1910. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library.

³ "Unidentified Pueblo women and baby, New Mexico." PA1990.13.249. New Mexico's Digital Collections. University of New Mexico. http://econtent.unm.edu/cdm4/item_viewer.php?CISOROOT=/abqmuseum&CISOPTR=996&CISOBX=1&REC=14.

⁴ Lane Coulter and Maurice Dixon, Jr., *New Mexican Tinwork, 1840-1940* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1990), 116-118.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 117-118.

⁸ Frieder Ryser, *Reverse Paintings on Glass: The Ryser Collection*, ed. and trans. Rudy Eswarin (Corning: Corning Museum of Glass, 1992), 32.

⁹ Lane Coulter, "A Migrant Craft: New Mexico," *Artes de Mexico* 44 (1999): 94.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Coulter and Dixon, *New Mexican Tinwork, 1840-1940*, 118.

used for religious practices.¹² Tin was an affordable metal for the small missions set up in Mexico.¹³ Artisans in the Southwest, however, adopted the techniques for use on more secular, utilitarian items. This frame, therefore, represents the marriage of all cultures that influenced the American Southwest, including Mexican, Spanish, Catholic, American, and native. According to Coulter, only “fourteen frames by the Isleta Tinsmith, most containing photographs of pueblo residents, have been located.”¹⁴

Based on this information, we can speculate that the women in the photograph were specifically from Isleta pueblo, where the frame was likely manufactured. Many of Cobb’s other subjects were identified as Isleta, wearing the same off-the-shoulder garments as the women in the photograph.¹⁵

Though reverse-painted glass objects in the United States were often assumed to be tourist objects, it is clear that frames of this kind had value among Southwesterners.¹⁶ “Tinwork objects were very popular in the pueblo [Isleta]” and photographs of Isleta and surrounding pueblos show frames much like Princeton’s hanging in the homes of Native Americans.¹⁷

This object is significant both in its aesthetic beauty and in how it embodies the multiple, international elements of Southwestern culture.

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¹² William C. Ketchum, “Reverse-glass painting,” in *The Encyclopedia of American Folk Art*, ed. Gerard C. Wertkin (New York: Routledge, 2004), 434.

¹³ Giora Fraser Giffords, “A Noble Metal,” *Artes de Mexico* 44 (1999): 83.

¹⁴ Coulter and Dixon, *New Mexican Tinwork, 1840-1940*, 116.

¹⁵ “Isleta girls.” Cobb Studio. ca. 1890. Princeton University Library.

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¹⁶ Ketchum, “Reverse-glass painting,” 435.

¹⁷ Coulter and Dixon, *New Mexican Tinwork, 1840-1940*, 116.

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