

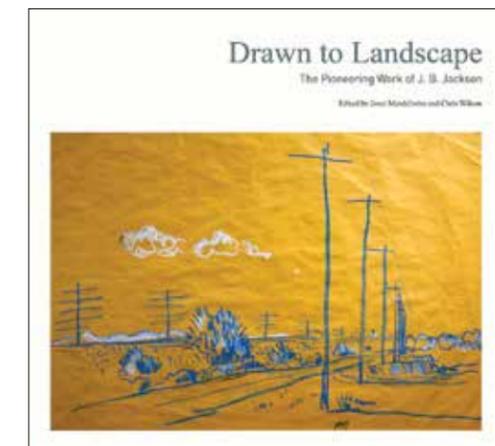


**RIGHT**  
Cattle ranch in northern  
New Mexico, 1952.

# SEE AND BE SEEN

## A NEW LOOK AT THE LANDSCAPE ICONOCLAST J. B. JACKSON.

BY JENNIFER REUT



### “WHO THE HELL IS J. B. JACKSON?”

It was a fair question in 1951, when John Brinckerhoff Jackson founded the magazine *Landscape* out of his house in New Mexico. He had no academic affiliation, had published only a smattering of essays (not on landscape) and a novel in the 1930s, yet he went on to become one of the most influential writers and teachers on the everyday American landscape that anyone has yet to read. He taught a generation of landscape architects, historians, architects, and geographers how to see.

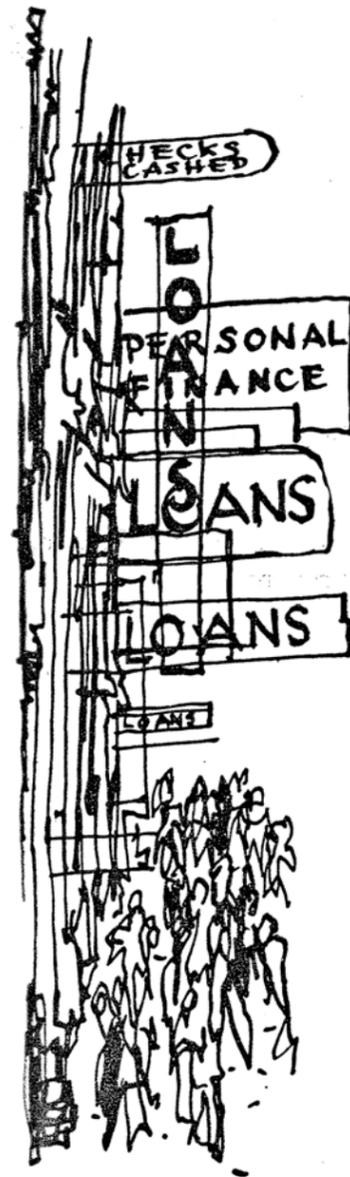
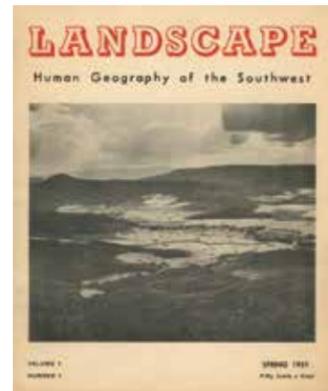
The question appears about midway through *J. B. Jackson and the Love of Everyday Places* (1989), one of two documentaries (the other is *Figure in a Landscape: A Conversation with J. B. Jackson*, from 1988) on the DVD that accompanies the limited-edition hardcover of the superb new book *Drawn to Landscape: The Pioneering Work of J. B. Jackson*.

FROM THE COLLECTION OF HELEN LEFKOWITZ HOROWITZ AND USED BY PERMISSION

Paul Groth, a Berkeley professor and Jackson protégé, repeats the question in his story about an East Coast colleague's reaction to the seemingly sudden appearance of *Landscape*, and it captures something of the general curiosity about Jackson and his work that animates this book.

Jackson is a foundational figure in landscape studies, a way of looking at the world that is part cultural landscape, part literary form, and not a little bit of *flânerie*. He saw the character in American landscape not in the high-art aspirations of our best architecture, but in the vernacular—the rural farmsteads, the back alleys, the trailer parks, and church parking lots where people actually live and work. As Chris Wilson, the J. B. Jackson Professor of Cultural Landscape Studies at the University of New Mexico, observes in his elegant introductory chapter, Jackson was one of the first to take seriously the road as a shaper of the American landscape, particularly the significance of the flashy commercial strip, and he sang its praises in the pages of *Landscape*, well before Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour published their landmark book in a similar vein, *Learning from Las Vegas*. Jackson was not the first to ask us to value the everyday in the American landscape, but he was the most eloquent.

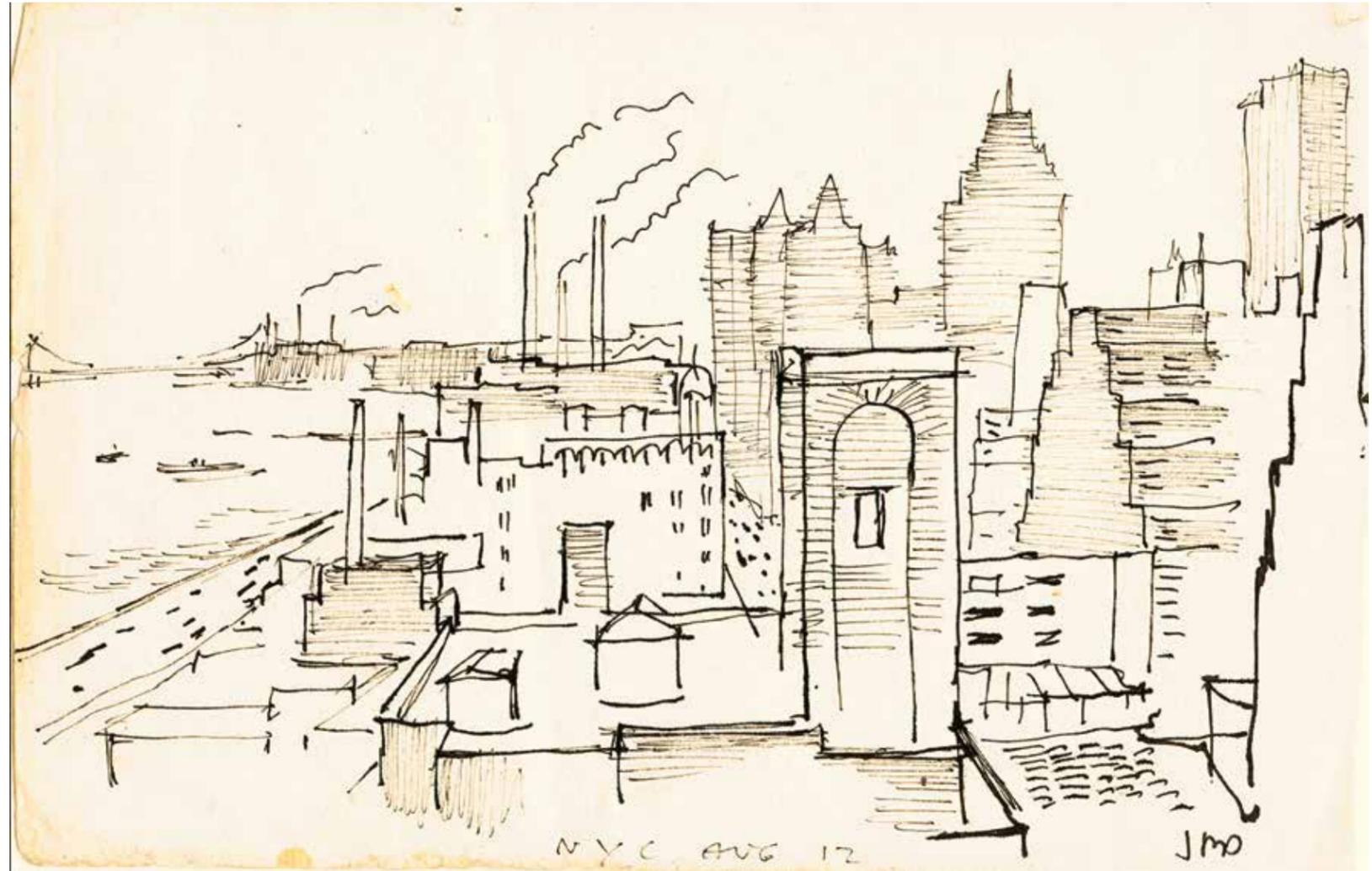
Edited by Wilson and the filmmaker Janet Mendelsohn, *Drawn to Landscape* is a beautifully conceived and executed volume, and, with the companion DVD, it is the most persuasive immersion in Jackson's way of seeing published outside his own writings. The heart of the book holds three full-color portfolios: drawings, covers of *Landscape* magazine, and photographs from Jackson's enormous archive of teaching slides. Seven essays offer



**LEFT**  
Drawing by J. B. Jackson from his essay, "The Stranger's Path," *Landscape*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Autumn 1957): 13.

**FAR LEFT**  
Front cover of *Landscape*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring 1951).

**OPPOSITE**  
View of FDR Drive, East River, and New York City, New York, August ca. 1950s.



USED BY PERMISSION OF PETER GOIN AND PAUL F. STARRS, BLACK ROCK INSTITUTE, RENO, NEVADA

FROM THE COLLECTION OF F. DOUGLAS ADAMS AND USED BY PERMISSION

up different aspects of Jackson's legacy and life and comment on the portfolios, which set the work, much of it previously unpublished, in context. Several of the essays were written by people who had long acquaintance with Jackson, and their intimacy with him enlarges and enriches our understanding of the contradictions and the accomplishments of the work as well as the person.

Jackson was born in France to an affluent American family and schooled at several elite private schools, including Harvard. He traveled in Europe between the wars, and published a well-received novel. He enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1940, and was soon called to intelligence work, owing in part



to his accumulated experience and social polish in several languages.

Many of the early drawings date from Jackson's time in the military, and in the short takes on landscape elements, you might discern the beginnings of a sensibility in formation. The essay by the architect F. Douglas Adams sets the drawings, which Jackson eventually gave to him, in context for the reader. This was a time when Jackson was developing his topographic and cartographic sense on the ground for the army and reading French geography in the manor houses they occupied. There are also drawings from Adams's and Jackson's annual sketching trips (Jackson was mad for his BMW motorcycle, apparently) over the course of 28 years, and here and elsewhere in the book, Jackson comes across as irreverent and voluble, a good companion on the road. You easily can imagine him buzzing between Berkeley and Harvard each year to teach, which he did in the 1960s and 1970s, stopping at the truck stops and roadside restaurants to look and to draw.

After the military, Jackson moved to New Mexico, where he more or less remained for the rest of his life. There were stints as a ranch hand, and more travel, and then the magazine, in 1951. In an essay



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**LEFT**  
City Institutions, City Centers, and Urban Workplaces; Office Buildings I. Fall River, [Massachusetts], no date.

**OPPOSITE TOP**  
Connections (all transportation except the strip); Highway Ecology, Eco-Highway, no date.

**OPPOSITE BOTTOM**  
Farms, General; Fields VI. Field Patterns, Eroded Fields, Missouri, Nineteenth Century, no date.



**ABOVE**  
The Strip, Signs;  
Commercial I,  
March 1972.

**OPPOSITE**  
Farms, General;  
Farmsteads II.  
American River Valley,  
[California], April 1970.

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PLANNING, ABOVE AND OPPOSITE



on *Landscape's* formative years, Paul F. Starrs and Peter Goin illuminate much of what has been shrouded in legend over the years. Early issues of *Landscape* mostly published Jackson's essays (under many pseudonyms), but the magazine soon drew other contributors including Garrett Eckbo, Yi-Fu Tuan, Grady Clay, and Carl O. Sauer. It was determinedly aimed at the general reader, rather than an academic audience, and the essays had a much-admired literary standard that attracted writers from far outside the field. The covers are reproduced here, though not the tables of contents, unfortunately, and they lead to a hope that the contents of all the issues might be digitized one day. By the time Jackson stepped down after 15 years to spend more time teaching, *Landscape* had attracted a coterie of high-profile admirers, including Lawrence Halprin, who makes an appearance in one of the documentaries to extol Jackson's way of seeing.

The photographs offer another way to understand Jackson's eye, but to really see them as he intended, the DVD is the better platform. Seeing them alone on the screen, rather than paired as they are in the book, and large, as they must have been when they were projected in the classroom, you can't help but admire the instinct for composition, even when the light is glaring or muddy. You can tell immediately what Jackson wanted you to see. (Note that the ones reproduced here retain Jackson's label and categorization standard.)



Here again, the companion essay, by Groth, puts the images in context. One of the most interesting insights he offers is on the way Jackson used them to teach. The photographs were used in class to accompany his popular lecture courses, but he did not pair them to make a comparative point, as art historians did. He would lecture first, for perhaps 30 or 40 minutes, before showing the slides at the end of class, and then only a handful. This seems wildly provocative now, particularly in our image-soaked culture. Jackson demanded a mental acuity from his students first; he taught them to think before they looked.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**

Jackson meeting informally with graduate students following a lecture at the University of California, Berkeley, 1981. Tank barrier in the Ardennes Forest near Wallonia, Belgium, December 1944. Private chapel and portion of a fortified plaza in Chimayo, New Mexico.



**ABOVE**  
Farms, General; Farmsteads. Colorado, April 1967.

notes, appendixes, and indexes, further enhances the book's utility as a comprehensive resource.

The essays in *Drawn to Landscape* are by the first generation to be directly influenced by Jackson. His students and successors at Berkeley are now themselves the elder statesmen in the field of landscape studies, spread out in universities and colleges across the country. The discursive, mobile, fractious, and committed study of the everyday landscape is alive and well; the fragmentation into the study of race, class, and gender a liberation rather than a declension into incoherence. There is more to be discovered. An epigraph, taken from the first issue of *Landscape*, remains apt: "A rich and beautiful book is always open before us. We have but to learn to read it." ●

*Drawn to Landscape: The Pioneering Work of J. B. Jackson*, edited by Janet Mendelsohn and Chris Wilson; Staunton, Virginia: George F. Thompson Publishing, 2015; 288 pages, \$75.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER WILLIAMS, J. B. JACKSON PICTORIAL MATERIALS FROM VARIOUS SOURCES (P&T 000-866), CENTER FOR SOUTHWEST RESEARCH, UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES, UNIVERSITY OF NEW MEXICO, TOP LEFT; FROM THE COLLECTION OF F. DOUGLAS ADAMS AND USED BY PERMISSION OF PETER GOIN AND PAUL F. STARRS, BLACK ROCK INSTITUTE, RENO, NEVADA, BOTTOM

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