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Himalayan Portfolios: Journeys of the Imagination

By Kenneth Hanson


Reviewed by Paul Kallmes

There is a small contingent of photographers who have taken the time and trouble to travel throughout the Himalaya and photograph the mountains and their inhabitants with large-format equipment. From the early works of Vittorio Sella and Joseph Rock through the modern work of Jody Forster and Kevin Bubriski, this form remains the province of the hardy few who understand the effort it takes to get to remote locations and then capturing them with the appropriate techniques and equipment. Kenneth Hanson has placed himself directly along this line of Himalayan diehards.

Himalayan Portfolios: Journeys of the Imagination is many things, among them a collection of top-flight photographs, an impressive amount of background on the regions portrayed, an exemplary publishing effort, and above all a testament to one man’s dedication and vision to his chosen topic. A scientist with a true appreciation for the aesthetics and technical nuance of large-format black-and-white photography, Hanson has created a remarkable portfolio of images and information in a dozen trips to the Himalaya, and we are fortunate indeed to have them in this book.

The photographs themselves capture fully the grandeur, severity, and appeal of the Himalaya. The book is also large-format, providing the proper scale to present the photographs. He rarely settles for standard views: his portrayal of the complete north ridge of Everest has few peers, nor could depth of field be more expertly applied. The people and the settings of their lives are deftly captured, with no unnecessary sentimentality. The choice of paper is critical to the proper presentation of the images, and the publisher has made an excellent choice. Well-printed, large-format B&W stands up to detailed scrutiny, and the attentive reader will be rewarded by studying the minute aspects of grand landscapes, which leads to a greater appreciation of the whole. Like a day spent traveling on foot through the great ranges, the greatest satisfaction can come as much from the observation of the smallest details as from taking in the big picture.

In addition to the images, there is a tremendous amount of supporting information. Extensive essays examine many different aspects of the range, from geology to geo-politics, empire-building to mountaineering. The captions are very detailed, and there is the requisite technical data about his approach. One could almost remove the pictures altogether and still have a substantial and fulfilling portrait of the Himalaya.

Most people know that the Himalaya are the grandest mountains on earth, but even with the familiarity we have with them, they never fail to astonish when captured by the right photographer. Ken Hanson has done us all a great service by putting this book together. No collection of modern Himalayan imagery should be considered complete without this book.

Paul Kallmes has been a mountaineer for over 30 years and was the driving force behind Summit: Vittorio Sella, Mountaineer and Photographer 1879-1909. Today he is an entrepreneur working to develop clean technologies and non-profit ventures, and he remains active in outdoor publishing and film festival circles. He hopes to keep climbing and traveling for at least another 30 years.