Ancient architecture in the Mississippi Valley

Monumentality seen and unseen

ANNA BLUME

In 1891 Cyrus Thomas published maps and descriptions of thousands of ancient architectural monuments that were still visible when American and European settlers spread out across the Mississippi and Ohio River valleys (fig. 1).1 In his map entitled Distribution of Mounds in the Eastern United States, we can see thousands of these monuments represented as dots, coalesced along the rivers as if they grew out of the water itself. What were these so-called “mounds” and why are they so unknown, and their history still so hidden in this country?

Since the nineteenth century, ancient monuments of the Mississippi Valley have been called mounds, whether they are small conical shapes nine feet in diameter or architectural structures comparable in magnitude to the pyramids of Mexico or Peru. They are solid earthen monuments made by hunter-gatherers or settled city dwellers, overlapping in time from 5000 BC to AD 1500. Hundreds of these structures are geometric, usually pyramidal, conical, or linear. Some are embankments that demark space, or public works to support homes or agriculture, while others are earthworks that represent recognizable animals and hybrid zoomorphs. The identity of the people who made these monumental structures is a complex matter with no definitive single answer or answers. The long course of time and the complex, violent history of the formation of the United States has fragmented and often destroyed links between ancient builders and contemporary American Indian communities. It is, however, certain that indigenous people of North America made them.

In the Lower Mississippi Valley, in Louisiana, is a site called Poverty Point, one of the most distinctive settlements of the late Archaic period (fig. 2). The very name “Poverty Point” tells us something of the site’s obscure modern history. In 1851 Philip Guier developed it into one of his southernmost plantations. Whereas

---

plantations in the Middle Mississippi Valley, in states such as Tennessee or Kentucky, often had luscious names like Tulip Hill or His Lordship’s Kindness, those in the Lower Mississippi Valley, which were less reliable in the production of cotton, were often given pejorative names like Poverty Point or Hard Times Plantation. While the archaeological site is currently a US National Monument and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, recognized for its ancient monumental architecture, it is still known by a name that marks it as a low-yield pre–Civil War plantation.

The built environment of Poverty Point included two conicals and one flat-top pyramid, two anomalous earthen structures, and six curved concentric ridges. Over one million cubic meters of soil were gathered, moved, and reconstituted to create this lived-in environment. Spread out over seven square kilometers and never faced in stone, these structures and public works blend into the land out of which they were built.

The monuments they first built at Poverty Point were a flat-top pyramid and then two conical earthworks. Later, they conceived and constructed the six concentric ridges, each originally six feet in height and three quarters of a mile long. They constructed these ridges as platforms where they placed hearths for cooking and may have built many of their homes. As a monumental public work, these arches are unique to the region; indeed they are unique to all of North America. The arched shape opens out what may have been used as a plaza-like space, leading Tristram Kidder to speculate on whether Poverty Point may have been a pilgrimage site specifically structured to welcome large influxes of people, who valued and contributed to its construction and maintenance. They built these monuments on a ridge within the rich alluvial floodplain of the lower Mississippi overlooking the meandering Bayou Maçon, a constant source of fresh water and fish.

The monuments they first built at Poverty Point were a flat-top pyramid and then two conical earthworks. Later, they conceived and constructed the six concentric ridges, each originally six feet in height and three quarters of a mile long. They constructed these ridges as platforms where they placed hearths for cooking and may have built many of their homes. As a monumental public work, these arches are unique to the region; indeed they are unique to all of North America. The arched shape opens out what may have been used as a plaza-like space, leading Tristram Kidder to speculate on whether Poverty Point may have been a pilgrimage site specifically structured to welcome large influxes of people, who valued and contributed to its construction and maintenance. They built these monuments on a ridge within the rich alluvial floodplain of the lower Mississippi overlooking the meandering Bayou Maçon, a constant source of fresh water and fish.

The monuments they first built at Poverty Point were a flat-top pyramid and then two conical earthworks. Later, they conceived and constructed the six concentric ridges, each originally six feet in height and three quarters of a mile long. They constructed these ridges as platforms where they placed hearths for cooking and may have built many of their homes. As a monumental public work, these arches are unique to the region; indeed they are unique to all of North America. The arched shape opens out what may have been used as a plaza-like space, leading Tristram Kidder to speculate on whether Poverty Point may have been a pilgrimage site specifically structured to welcome large influxes of people, who valued and contributed to its construction and maintenance. They built these monuments on a ridge within the rich alluvial floodplain of the lower Mississippi overlooking the meandering Bayou Maçon, a constant source of fresh water and fish.
temporary inhabitants. The arrangement of the arches in evenly spaced rows that arc in alignment with the arc of the facing bayou reveals the desire of their builders to actively engage with the topography of the land. To repeat the arc of the Bayou in the shape of their man-made ridges visually and experientially established an ongoing conversation with the myriad bodies of water connected to the nearby Mississippi River.

Compositionally, these six ridges were an extraordinary monumental public work collectively built to integrate the living presence of a community within a landscape. They were not a wall to keep anyone out, but rather a set of arcs that clearly linked a particular community to a particular landscape.

Around 1300 BC, some 350 years after they began building at the site, the people of Poverty Point built their last and largest monument, now known as Mound A (fig. 5). Carefully placed at the apex of the arced ridges, Mound A is 72 feet high, 710 feet long, and 660 feet wide. It is a solid earthen structure that was built in three discernible stages. To build each stage from the platform up, they purposefully gathered and mixed three distinctly different kinds of soil. These soils were different in color and composition and may have been gathered and used at each stage for conceptual and/or structural purposes.

The careful arrangement of these soils further reveals the highly organized, deliberate, and conscious nature of their construction. Since there was no evidence of weathering between the stages, they must have built this structure rapidly, in as little as three months moving over fifteen million baskets of dirt from the immediate area. There is also no evidence that they built any structure on top of Mound A or buried any individual inside. It stands as a monumental work made by and for those who chose to live here. The egalitarian nature of life and the meaning or purpose of art at Poverty Point can also be seen in the distribution of stones. Given its location in the alluvial valley, there are no naturally formed stones of any kind within sixty kilometers of Poverty Point. Any lithic tools, or lithics of any kind, would have been imported. Despite their rarity, the stones found at the site—which were brought from as far as one thousand miles north—were not hoarded by an elite; they are found evenly spread beneath the concentric ridges, along with baked clay forms for cooking.

When looked at closely and in comparison with other known ancient societies of the first and second millennia BC, such as the Olmec of central Mexico or Egyptians

---


of the Twentieth Dynasty of the New Kingdom, Poverty Point defies norms and expectations that link monumentality with elite patronage. At Poverty Point, people formed a settled society without agriculture. They built monumental architecture and earthworks without vast hierarchical divisions. In such a context, how can we begin to understand monumental architecture such as Mound A and the six concentric semicircular ridges along the edge of Bayou Maçon? If we look at them as visual forms constructed within a chosen location, they begin to read as elements within a carefully composed landscape communally built for a shared experience of agency in relation to space and time.

Given the importance of water for settled life in the ancient world, the settlement of Poverty Point begins with what is most conspicuously already there, that is, the Bayou Maçon itself. Together, the bayou and Pleistocene ridge provided prolonged safe access to water without the risk of flooding so common in the alluvial Mississippi Valley. The low, long, and arced ridges are a complex oxymoron, both large and inconspicuous at the same time. They are semicircular embankments built to complement quotidian life. Conversely, Mound A slopes up symmetrically from behind the arced ridges into a mountainous earthen monument. On top of Mound A, they had created for themselves an exceptional vantage point from which to look out over the arced ridges and would have been able to experience them as a visual reverberation of their immediate source of water. In this striking composition, man-made monuments and the natural contours of the land were orchestrated to visually echo and complement one another.

By composing the landscape in this way, the creators of these structures collectively behaved like water itself, the original force that sculpted the land, especially
evident in the Lower Mississippi Valley. This kind of man-made monumental art was a performance by the people of Poverty Point that phenomenologically linked them to one another in an active ongoing manner—ongoing in the sense that once built, these massive structures remained dynamic presences that visually and experientially continued to link people to the environment that they had chosen, altered, and shaped. Phenomenology is important here in that it reveals the meaning that is in the making and subsequent experience of living with what you have made.7

Approximately 150 years after the completion of Mound A, sometime between 1000 and 800 BC, the people of Poverty Point abandoned this site. This occurred in a transitional period marked by radically increased periods of rain. And though there is no evidence that flooding occurred at Poverty Point, the rain would nevertheless have disrupted the influx of seasonal inhabitants and long-distance trade so important to the formation and maintenance of the city.8

In his 1944 Geological Investigation of the Alluvial Valley of the Lower Mississippi River, Harold Fisk completed a deep-time history of the river valley that included Poverty Point. Forty-four oversize maps, with their interwoven meandering colors, represent the movement of water shaping the land in successive periods dating as far back as the Mesozoic era, 252 million years ago. Each major shift of the meander belt is marked by pastel green, red, blue, or yellow—colors that are further differentiated by hatching and dots that modify their hue, dramatically and aesthetically immersing us in the continuous, ongoing life of the Mississippi River (fig. 6). Represented in solid sage green and marked as number 19, the meander belt swerved no closer than fifteen miles from Poverty Point, providing the benefits of the Mississippi’s resources without the

---


danger of direct flooding. In a second map, which represents the stream courses within the alluvial valley, Fisk represented the Maçon Ridge as beige, a color used to indicate that this Pleistocene ridge had never been breached. This reveals how carefully the settlers at Poverty Point had chosen their site, selecting a safe location for living and monument building within this water-rich region.9

As a cartographer, Fisk was acutely aware of the agency of the river, representing its complexities with intricate visual and linguistic detail. He used verbs such as “follows,” “meander,” and “enter,” acknowledging the river as a terrestrial actor over millions of years of geologic time. He and his team could translate onto paper the deep history of the Mississippi with demonstrative and evocative care, leading one to wonder what became of this way of knowing when modern cities were built along the flood-prone shores of the Mississippi River and Gulf Coast of antebellum Louisiana. From 1600 BC, when Poverty Point was first settled, to the present day, a profound disconnect has occurred between what we can know and how we have chosen to live. The specificity and care with which the site’s Stone Age occupants chose the Maçon Ridge has been forgotten even as collectors have hoarded information and artifacts about ancient American cultures, amassing knowledge that has been largely disregarded and untapped.

Fisk’s maps are just one example of a massive body of work recording elements of the natural world that could provide specific understanding about where and how to build cities to withstand predictable fluctuations of rivers and oceans. Ironically, as we tragically saw along the lower Mississippi and Gulf Coast in 2005 during Hurricane Katrina, the overabundance of available information did not make us more able to survive or live with the contingencies of nature than our counterparts during the second millennium BC at Poverty Point. Similarly, beginning in the 1830s, as settlers aggressively tilled the land of the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, they found thousands of Native American artifacts. Along with expertly generated geological and cartographic information, these Native American artifacts were and often continue to be hoarded in personal and national collections and are rarely looked at or considered in regard to the first people of this land. And though the ancient Native American city of Poverty Point achieved international renown in 2014 when it was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site, it remains largely unknown to the broader public as one of the first settled complex communities in North America. Even today, the Army Corps of Engineers, which funded Fisk, continues to produce an extensive body of knowledge about the recent and deep history of land in the United States—a project that raises questions about the impetus to collect information that often is neglected. It is as if the act of collecting itself was and is a symptom of a deep, unconscious national anxiety about the history of this occupied land.

The cartographic studies by Fisk and Thomas are just two among hundreds on the Mississippi River and the ancient monumental architecture of its valleys. In library archives and through digital image searches, one can find an astounding range of representations of monumental architectural structures and earthworks of the ancient United States. There are drawings of the flat-topped pyramids in Bolivar County, Mississippi (fig. 7); the carefully surveyed land and drawn maps of the geometric embankments at Newark, Ohio; and aerial photographs of the 1,200-foot serpent in Adams County, Ohio. There are images of the now destroyed zoomorph at Burlington, Wisconsin; the postholes and excavated

---

earthworks at Crigler, Kentucky (fig. 8); and the carefully mowed grass over the monuments at Etowah in Georgia. There are sequential images of a monument in eastern Missouri that was willfully destroyed in 1869 (fig. 9), and hundreds of images of what remains of Monks Mound, the largest pyramid north of Teotihuacan, cinched between two highways just outside of St. Louis at Cahokia in Collinsville, Illinois.

Within pre-Columbian studies of the Americas, with very few exceptions, these ancient monuments of North America are completely cordoned off from the canon of Mesoamerican and South American archaeology, as if the border of Mexico was something other than a political artifact of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In primary and secondary schools we do not teach this vast ancient pre-Columbian past of our own country, nor is it an integral part of identity in the United States. Collectively we are not comfortable with a complex American Indian past of monuments and cities.

10. For studies of the pre-Columbian past that include essays on North American archaeology and anthropology, see A Pre-Columbian World, ed. J. Quilter and M. Miller (Washington, DC, 2006), and Early New World Monumentality, ed. R. L. Burger and R. M. Rosenswig (Gainesville, FL, 2012).
Their existence gives lie to the Pristine Myth, or claims of Manifest Destiny that begin with a fabled story of untouched land waiting to be claimed and developed by pilgrims and earlier settlers from the Atlantic to the Mississippi. If we replace that founding myth with the more complex reality that these monumental works irrefutably place before us, then we begin to do a kind of thinking that will at once shatter an overarching sense of entitlement and open up a reflective rapport with a past that offers diverse models of city and monument building within the architectural record of the ancient world. Such models should not be seen with nostalgia for the past or utopian thoughts of the future, but rather as discrete, reverberating elements of the history of people and this land that might humble and entice a school child (as well as any one of us, in or outside of the academy) to look, reflect, and think deep history and the present together.

***

So, let us begin again, this time along the Upper Mississippi Valley and east to the Great Lakes, where American Indian communities between 800 BC and AD 1200 made thousands of monumental earthworks, many of which are still visible on bluffs or ridges above marshlands and bodies of water. They sculpted and carved these works in geometric conicals and linear forms as well as in the shape of known animals such as bears, eagles, or geese. Some of the most distinctive earthworks of this region are hybrid zoomorphs with conspicuously long tails. Some are built up to eight feet
in height while others are intaglions scraped into the
surface of the earth. These Woodland builders were
hunter-gatherers who formed small temporary
settlements and traveled seasonally. They grew modest
cornfields and other forms of small-scale horticulture
distinct from the hierarchical, settled, and large-scale
agricultural communities at Cahokia, Illinois, or Aztalan,
Wisconsin.

In 1848, during the migration of British, German,
Welsh, Scottish, Irish, and other colonial American
settlers into the region, Increase Allen Lapham began to
survey hundreds of American Indian monuments that
were still plainly visible. Indeed, it was in the mid-
nineteenth century—just as land was rapidly being
claimed in the Ohio and Mississippi valleys for homes,
businesses, and agricultural development—that
extensive surveys and records of ancient architecture
were commissioned and published by the Smithsonian
Institution, newly founded in 1846. It was as if in a
single moment the layers of an Indian past, marked into
the land over centuries of habitation, demanded to be
seen, measured, and drawn but were then promptly
relegated to an archive or deemed an insignificant
aberration—one just as easily leveled or built over as
any other hill or grove. The evidence in the drawings
themselves became more a record of advances in
surveying and mapmaking, a project crucial to nation-
building, than a testament to the diverse and extensive
civilizations and communities that had previously
existed. In this way Lapham’s 1855 Antiquities of
Wisconsin, along with Ephraim Squier and Edwin Davis’s
better-known 1848 Ancient Monuments of the
Mississippi Valley, miniaturized, mass-produced, and
bound within books these enigmatic monuments at the
very time when the vast majority of them were being
willfully obliterated.11

Those who did speculate on who made these
impressive architectural forms developed theories
attributing them to a range of candidates, from the Lost
Tribes of Israel, to temporary migrants from Central
America, to prehistoric giant humans that might have
lived in the Jurassic Period alongside dinosaurs.12 In
most cases, there was no interest in thinking about a link
between these monuments and contemporary Native
Americans of the region, who would have included the
Ho-Chunk, Potawatomi, Chippewa, Fox, Menomonee,
and Sac. Instead these works were as a whole relegated
to the realm of ahistorical wonderment.

But what if we want to know, or want to enter into a
relationship of knowing with these ancient monuments
and the people who built them? Can we push back
against erasure and return with that intention to
Lapham’s maps as he takes us to over fifty-five different
sites with hundreds of then still visible monuments?

11. I. A. Lapham, The Antiquities of Wisconsin, as Surveyed and
Described (Washington, DC, 1855); E. G. Squier and E. H. Davis,
Ancient Monuments of the Mississippi Valley (Washington, DC, 1848).

12. For a well-sourced discussion of nineteenth- and early
twentieth-century theories about the builders of ancient monuments
of the Upper Mississippi Valley, see R. A. Birmingham and L. E.
Can this kind of return shatter the embedded and overly repeated narrative of tepees, feathered headdresses, and tomahawks to make way for complex, creative settlements, monuments, and diversely lived lives? We might, for instance, return to a place in Wisconsin known as Indian Prairie, where in 1850 Lapham carefully surveyed the entire plateau that sits on a ridge thirty feet above the Milwaukee River (fig. 10). At this one site, Lapham measured and drew thirty-one monuments: twenty-two conical and two linear structures, two bird earthworks, and five intaglios of a hybrid animal.

At Indian Prairie, Lapham meticulously surveyed and drew the monuments within the context of their surroundings, which included a forest, river, marshland, prairie, and garden beds. The prairie that covers close to a third of the site, like the monuments themselves, was created by communities that collectively and continuously cleared the area of trees, altering it into land that could be more easily cultivated with small seasonal crops or grazed upon by the animals that they hunted. This clearing began as early as 800 BC, at the time the conicals were built in the northeastern portion of the site. Successive communities altered and manipulated the forests to create swaths of more open environments for the purposes of hunting animals—first with atlatls and long spears, later with bows and arrows. They also used controlled fires to seasonally burn and clear the forest floor to promote the growth of wild berries and other small crops that thrive in shade.

At the north central section of the site are the remains of three circular corn hills, each of which Lapham drew as two small concentric circles: one at the edge of the forest where it meets the prairie and two inside the forest. At the southern tip of the site are the remains of a single garden bed, a slightly different small-scale farming technique, made up of twenty-five rows of corn four feet in width and six inches apart. The deliberate placement of these horizontal rows under the wingspan and extending over the elongated body of the large bird earthwork reveals yet another characteristic of sites where successive generations of communities have altered and added distinct layers. The conical earthworks date back to the eighth century; the effigies, including these birds, date closer to the twelfth century; and the small patch of corn rows indicated by Lapham with slightly darkened lines in an ovoid shape were dug and maintained by successive Native American communities that continued to occupy this land. This propensity for layering renders the land like a palimpsest of ancient parchment, used over and over again with each subsequent use present, creating an ongoing, open-ended montage. Side-by-side earthworks and cornfields, prairies, and sculpted forests were built and arranged, leaving a trace of the societies that integrated art, labor, and subsistence.

In the conical earthworks found throughout the Mississippi and Ohio valleys, Native Americans often buried the remains of a few members of their community, something they rarely did in the sculpted forms of birds and animals. The small number of these burials relative to the number of monuments indicates that their funerary aspect is only one element within a multifaceted context. At Poverty Point a significant number of the builders lived at the site year-round, continuously for five centuries. Their monuments constituted the perimeters of a long-term lived-in environment. At Indian Prairie and hundreds of other sites above the lakes and rivers of the Upper Mississippi Valley, smaller, heterogeneous groups traveled through the regions where they made earthworks. These sculpted environments were not raised areas for hearths like the ridges at Poverty Point. Instead, they were areas marked for communal, conceptual practices that linked their makers to one another and to the land, water, sky, and animals.

The two colossal bird earthworks on the south end of the naturally formed ridge at Indian Prairie differ in size and are oriented in different directions. The smaller bird follows the contour of the ridge over the marshland below and thus appears to be flying northeast. The larger bird, which has a body below the wingspan of 166 feet, was constructed on a portion of the ridge that narrows into a tight oblong niche. Within this enclosure, the bird is poised to fly north, parallel to the Milwaukee River.

15. Lapham’s drawing locates the rows on either side of the bird’s body, but his textual description explains that they covered the body as well; Lapham, *The Antiquities of Wisconsin*, 19.
16. Rather than as part of a montage, Lapham sees the addition of the “garden beds” as a kind of desecration undifferentiated from the “labors of the white man . . . to obliterate these vestiges of an ancient people.” Lapham, *The Antiquities of Wisconsin*, 19.
Figure 10. “Ancient Works at Indian Prairie,” ca. 800 BC–AD 1200. I. A. Lapham, The Antiquities of Wisconsin, as Surveyed and Described (Washington, DC, 1855), pl. VIII.
just to the east. The river then and now is constantly in motion while this monumental bird built out of soil is still. In creating an earthwork in the shape of an animal known for flight, the builders intervened in the course of time, fossilizing a concept into the land. In choosing to make the bird so large—about twenty times the size of even the largest raptor—the builders transformed their work into an actual characteristic of the land, fully integrating it within the naturally formed oblong ridge that enframes it. This profound shift in scale conspicuously points to the hands and labor that made these works. Their constructions reveal thinking minds that sought, through the making of art, to collectively and repeatedly engage their human presence with the river landscape, the flight of a bird of prey, and the evasive concept of time.

And though both birds may represent a raptor, such as a soaring eagle or hawk, their dimensions are intentionally elongated with an enormous wingspan and thin, elegant body. These features point to a specific collective aesthetic throughout the Northeast, from Lake Michigan to the Upper Mississippi Valley. By sculpting an image of a bird into the landscape, they had already transformed a mass of soil into a feathered flying creature. By elongating the silhouette of the bird, the makers added and accentuated an element of abstraction, further opening up their composition to conceptual thoughts about flight and stillness, water and land, life and death.18

North of the two bird earthworks, at the center of the site, the builders collectively carved into the surface of the land four large intaglios of an anomalous zoomorph. While they had made the birds by gathering and composing hundreds of baskets of dirt in the same way the communities at Poverty Point had made Mound A, the creation of the intaglios required clearing a segment of land, outlining the shape they wanted, and then carefully scraping the ground to articulate the desired shape. To accentuate and maintain these compositions, they then outlined the forms with the excess dirt they had excavated.19 The builders oriented the four zoomorphs in the same direction, moving away from the river and curving toward the birds to the south. They are long-tailed quadrupeds represented in profile, with two visible legs pointing west and the head pointing east. The body becomes radically elongated toward the north as it tapers into an exceedingly long tail. Lapham drew thin dense lines to indicate the scraped surface of the land, outlining white areas around the upper body to represent the excavated soil used to further accentuate the intaglio. He gives measurements for two of the four intaglios, the larger of which is 140 feet long, with its lower body measuring 87 feet, nearly twice the length of its head and torso. Such animal forms with anomalously long lower bodies and tails are common among ancient earthworks of the region. They appear both as carved intaglios and as raised earthworks, as exemplified by the monuments at Pewaukee, Wisconsin (fig. 11). Given their proportions, they may be hybrids, such as part feline and part reptile, or they may be completely imaginary creatures specific to the generations of nomadic and semi-nomadic communities that made and maintained them.20

In 1850, when Lapham surveyed Indian Prairie, he could see and represent layers of the successive occupations and transformations of the site. While he was there, groups of Menominee Indians still seasonally camped at Indian Prairie and had recently buried their dead on top of one of the conicals at the site’s northern edge.21 In spite of the disastrous consequences of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, by which the federal government required massive numbers of Native American communities to move west of the Mississippi, this particular group of the Menominee maintained their rights to hunting and fishing grounds north of Milwaukee. On the left side of his drawing, Lapham provided a detailed image of one of their log structures. Just one year later, in 1851, J. H. Bender bought and cultivated the land that included the site. By 1902, most of the earthworks were leveled by wheat-field cultivation and the building of

18. Hopewellian artists of the adjacent Ohio Valley used a similar combination of abstraction and iconicity on a much smaller scale when making their distinctive mica silhouettes, such as the mica hand found in Ross County (Ohio Historical Society AL02821), with its elongated fingers and carefully bent thumb. A work like this was meant in part to pose questions about what it meant to make things with your hands, or what it meant to be stone or flesh.
19. These intaglios were made in the same way as other carved earthworks of the ancient Americas—such as the Nazca lines on the pampa of Peru and the less well-known intaglios along the banks of the Colorado River—though they are not connected to them by any known historical link.
20. These zoomorphs may be an earlier Woodland form of the long-tailed water panther of Siouan- and Algonquian-speaking communities from eastern regions of the Mississippi Valley; see G. E. Lankford, “Some Cosmological Motifs in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” in Ancient Objects and Sacred Realms: Interpretations of Mississippian Iconography, ed. F. K. Reilly III and J. F. Garber (Austin, TX, 2007), 17.
Bender Road, which ran through the site. A gristmill was then built over the earliest large conicals. By 1930, a gravel quarry further erased any trace of the monumental earthworks, garden beds, prairie, and Menominee graves at Indian Prairie, leaving Lapham’s drawing as the only visual evidence that they ever existed.  

* * * *

The massive still birds and group of intaglio animal forms along the river at Indian Prairie, like the charted flight of a crested heron in a photograph by Étienne-Jules Marey, are artifacts of the imagination of the people who made them (fig. 12). If we focus on the technology of their making and the way they engage the experience of seeing, we can begin to unravel what is unique and specific to them as representational forms. In his 1886 experiment, Marey attached a string to the body of the bird that pulled on the lever of his camera to create multiple successive exposures of its movements that could be printed on paper as a still image of flight. The image was often printed as a cyanotype, the blue pigment of which gives an illusion of sky, though in reality Marey was working in a studio, seeking to record and investigate movement through a photographic process that anticipated cinema. For Marey, the photographic image could reveal minute aspects of the physiology of birds in the process of flight that the unaided eye could not see. Conversely, the constructed birds and animal intaglios at Indian Prairie are too large and low to the ground to be fully seen at any single point of visual reference. The unseeable quality of these earthworks is a fundamental aspect of their composition. Whereas Marey sought to visually dissect animals through the use of nineteenth-century technology, the builders at Indian Prairie intentionally expanded images of animals beyond visual apprehension. To see these animals in the land, one must walk the site, feel with one’s foot the edge of each structure as it swells up from the ground, see fragments of the body, and mentally process the whole. This dynamic interactive experience engages the imagination, pointing to aspects of birds and other animals that could not be contained in one visual experience or thought, indicating and acknowledging something about these creatures that cannot be wholly seen or known by the bare human eye.

To move from a bird in flight that an individual could see for a short moment to an enormous representation of a bird sculpted by a community into the land raises the question of monumentality. In thinking about why monuments are made and who they are made for, the literary critic Barbara Johnson speculates that the monumental “figure or structure is there to express the inexpressible, to remember the unarticulable.” Johnson goes on to write that “A monument, then, is supposed to

---

22. Brown, “Archeological History of the Milwaukee County,” 88. In a personal communication with Amy Rosebrough, staff archaeologist at the Wisconsin Historical Society, she wrote, “There is a chance, however, that some of the mounds and even part of one intaglio are sealed under the old railroad bed so the site may not be entirely lost” (email to author, September 2, 2015).

confer on a memory the immortality that only inanimate things can possess. It seeks, through ‘slow-endeavoring art,’ to honor something mere living memory might forget, or something that demands a collective, not an individual, response." When looking at Lapham’s drawing of Indian Prairie and Marey’s photographs, we are looking at images made with technologies specific to the nineteenth century. Lapham measured the site and all of its details with a sextant and then translated those measurements into a scaled drawing. The scaled, miniaturized representation of the colossal bird and the overall representation of the Indian Prairie site give us information that we can learn from, but it is also information that we must resist, see and unsee, if we want to collectively “honor something mere living memory might forget.” Lapham’s drawing gives us an illusion that we might be able to see or fully consume the image of the bird, or even the entire landscape, in one look. By doing so he took the experience of monumentality out of these works. Following the logic of Johnson, he has removed the “inexpressible” and “unarticulable,” the very elements that first inspired the ancient builders to make these massive monuments that reverberate in the land and call out for engagement. It is their monumentality and these unseeable elements that bring these works more fully into the present and into our consciousness, allowing us to feel something of their impact.

Postscript

For several months in 2015, when I traveled to archaeological sites along the Mississippi from Louisiana to the Great Lakes, of course I brought a camera with me. Before arriving at Effigy Mounds National Monument in Iowa, on a ridge overlooking the upper Mississippi, I read Clark Mallam’s “Ideology from the Earth,” which relates how teams of archaeologists in 1974 outlined with white lime powder the ten bears, birds, and linear earthworks at this site so that their forms would be pronouncedly visible in the aerial photographs they planned to take (fig. 13). I also was able to see the more recent 2011 LiDAR images that represent mass by the projection and reception of laser light technology. But all of this writing and all of these images, regardless of their varying degrees of verisimilitude or indexicality, could not convince me that these earthworks dating as far back as the seventh century were actually there. Why had I never heard of them?

When I arrived at the park I was directed by a ranger to leave my car along the river on the eastern side of the train tracks and to then carefully cross the winding two-lane mountain road to enter an unmarked logging path that wound up to the site. There were no tickets necessary, no signs or crowds like I had seen at other archaeological sites. As I climbed up the forested ravine,
the only sounds were from the wind, the birds, and the scurrying of animals. When I arrived at the highest elevation overlooking the river, I came through a forest and began to make out the slightly risen forms of the bears (fig. 14). They were to the left and right of me on an undulating slope, all oriented with their heads pointed south and their legs east as if walking along the ridge following the river below. They were made not just for the eyes to see but rather for a more synesthetic immersion: an immersion into a landscape that the bears had been built out of and embedded within. The photographs I took, like the aerial images of the site, not only reduce the monumentality of these works to a rectangular-formatted miniature, they also, by their very nature as photographs, privilege seeing over the other senses. You are looking at images of these bears, but you are not engaged with their massive scale, low to the ground and spread out over the ridge. As the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa has written, “Photographed architectural images are centralized images of focused gestalt; yet the quality of an architectural reality seems to depend fundamentally on the nature of peripheral vision, which enfolds the subject in the space... Peripheral vision integrates us with space, while focused vision pushes us out of the space, making us mere spectators.”

Writing about the effects of the overuse of photography as a way to represent and understand architectural structures, Pallasmaa reminds us that the sense of sight is only one of the senses that architecture engages. There is the sense of sound, and smell, and the far view of context, the multiplicity of surfaces, and the duration of time, and the simultaneity of all these effects, most of which the photograph excludes, but which are fundamental to the making and experience of monumental architecture and earthworks.

Being there, it was not difficult to let go of the photographs I had seen. I could and did let them go, and with them, the role of being a “mere spectator.” Walking around these man-made monumental bears I could

26. J. Pallasmaa, The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses (Chichester, 2005), 13. The scale of earthworks within a landscape aligns them with architecture and raises many of the same issues of how they are seen and experienced.
palpably feel the presence of something I cannot fully describe. It was a presence and a calling out, this marking in the land, a calling out at the time they were made and a calling out still to memorialize something Johnson had recognized as “slow-endeavoring art,” to honor something mere living memory might forget, or something that demands a collective, not an individual, response.”

What these monuments mean at Poverty Point, or Indian Prairie, or here on a high ridge over the Mississippi River shifts in time. And though we may hypothesize what they meant to the people who made them, at least part of their meaning today is a loud, resounding wake-up to their astounding presence and all that they imply about what we choose to forget or remember.