BLACK CAÑON.
THE LONG DRAW
On the trail of an artistic mystery in the American West
By Jeremy Miller
Photography by Lena Herzog

In 1857, Lieutenant Joseph Christmas Ives led the first American expedition into the Grand Canyon. Unlike John Wesley Powell's famous 1869 voyage, Ives's journey was barely publicized. Under the aegis of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers, the party—geologists, engineers, deckhands, Yuma interpreters, natural historians, mapmakers, and artists—took a steamboat up the Colorado River to see whether it could serve as a military supply route into Utah Territory, where Mormon insurgents had killed travelers and harassed army convoys. According to historian William Goetzmann, the only throngs that saw the crew off were groups of "giggle Indians" who stood along the banks.

The reaction was similarly muted when Ives's 400-page Report Upon the Colorado River of the West was finally published by Congress in 1861. The Civil War had begun, and few were clamoring for reports from the distant West. It was only decades later, after the Grand Canyon had become fixed in the public's imagination, that the importance of the Ives report was recognized: it contained not only the first written description of the interior of the canyon but the first images of it as well, by expedition artist Friedrich von Egloffstein.

In Egloffstein's engraving Black Cañon, said to depict the Colorado River near where the Hoover Dam stands today, the sheer black walls of the canyon appear scored into the page with a blunt, burnt stick. At the bottom of the frame, two tiny figures wrestle a rowboat from a raging, foam-white river.

It is a stunning image, but it looks nothing like the Grand Canyon. Indeed, in all of Egloffstein's drawings of what the Ives report called the "Big Cañon" of the Colorado—three engravings and three panoramic line drawings—the landscape is unrecognizable. Instead of a sprawling gorge with distinctive strata, the images are crowded with towering spires and sharp pinnacles.

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Photographer's note: Friedrich von Egloffstein was not only a military man, an explorer, a mapmaker, and an accomplished landscape artist, he also invented halftone printing on steel, perfected gravure techniques, and in 1865 was granted a patent for "An improved mode of obtaining printing surfaces by photography." Like Nadar, a pioneering balloonist and one of the first great photographers and printers, Baron von Egloffstein combined an artistic sensibility with an astonishing technical competence.
Yet Egloffstein was no incompetent: the Ives report also includes his meticulous, almost photo-realistic shaded relief map of the Grand Canyon. How could he have gotten the map so right and the landscapes so wrong? Once Egloffstein’s images were studied by those who had seen the canyon, they were ridiculed. Frederick Dellenbaugh, a member of Powell’s expedition, wrote in 1934 that:

Almost all the landscapes, full page and in the text, are childish exaggerations without character. . . . Of course imagination had a lot to do with leading them astray. Everything was so gigantic and extraordinary that the real record of lines on paper seemed insufficient to convey the wonders.

Egloffstein died in 1885, so he couldn’t answer Dellenbaugh’s criticism, which was only the opening salvo to decades of disparagement. Writing in 1953, Wallace Stegner called Egloffstein’s images “markedly inaccurate,” and said the “exaggerated verticality and narrowness” are “a picture of the artist’s dismay.” He, like Dellenbaugh, suggested that Egloffstein simply could not comprehend the arid, incised canyon country he saw. In his 1966 book, Exploration and Empire, Goetzmann said the pictures look like the allegorical works of French painter Gustave Doré: “The Grand Canyon is fitted into a European stereotype of Gothic verticality . . . [i]t reached to the heavens and dropped to the depths like gorges out of Doré’s underworld.” Historian Stephen J. Pyne asserted in Dutton’s Point: An Intellectual History of the Grand Canyon (1982) that Egloffstein’s art was “divorced from the rigor of cartography,” and he “permitted his romanticism to luxuriate into topographic fantasies.”

Although much of Egloffstein’s past is unknown, his critics embodied their analysis with a few details. The Baron’s youth was spent in Egloffstein Castle, a sprawling estate situated atop a cliff. His father, Wilhelm, held the title Master of the Royal Bavarian Forests. Why the young, military-trained nobleman came to the American West is not clear, but several historians have pointed to the coincidence of his arrival in the late 1840s with a series of working-class uprisings in Western Europe.

It is a seductive storyline: the European aristocrat-in-exile in the Wild West. At canyon’s edge, the homiesick baron begins to draw. He strives for accuracy but all he knows are the mist-shrouded forests and green hillsides of his native northern Bavaria. He exaggerates, substituting verticality for vastness; impenetrable, fortresslike walls for eroding sedimentary layers. Like a tragic hero, he doesn’t see it. Or, as Stegner wrote with confidence, “He saw the canyons that way.”

I first encountered Egloffstein’s Black Cañon at the New York Public Library’s 2001 exhibition Heading West: Mapping the Territory. My reaction to the gothic image was entirely different from that of Egloffstein’s critics. Before reading the caption detailing the artist’s “failure,” I read the landscape. The soaring rock faces, the foaming river, the play of light on the narrowly spaced walls—I recognized them immediately. The canyon indeed bore little resemblance to the Grand Canyon, but it looked remarkably similar to the Black Cañon of the Gunnison River—some 500 miles northeast of the Grand Canyon, in present-day Colorado—where I had been hiking for years. Next to the engraving was Egloffstein’s relief map of the southwestern United States drawn for the 1859 Macomb expedition. The trace corresponding to the Gunnison River was marked Grand River.

Down the hall at the library’s map division I asked Alice Hudson, the curator of the exhibition, whether some grave injustice had been inflicted on the poor German mapmaker. In addition to the similarities between the engraving and the Gunnison’s deep gorge, I pointed out what the Macomb map clearly indicated: the Gunnison River was once known as the Grand. Hudson in turn brought out another Egloffstein engraving, View Showing the Formation of the Cañon of the Grand River, which was published in 1855, after Egloffstein accompanied John Charles Frémont on his expedition through the area around the Gunnison.1

Hudson told me that the quantity of geographical information gathered during the so-called Great Reconnaissance was massive and unprecedented. It was certainly plausible, she said, that Egloffstein drew the canyon of the Grand (which is to say, Gunnison River) and that congressional staff wading through this flood misfiled the images—say, in a master file tagged “Grand Canyon”—which were then selected when the time came to illustrate the Ives report.2 However they

1 Captain John Gunnison visited the Grand River a few months ahead of Frémont. Egloffstein would later take over for Richard Kern, the Gunnison expedition’s mapmaker and landscape artist, after Kern, Gunnison, and six other members of the party were killed in western Utah, and it is likely that Egloffstein studied Kern’s drawings of the Black Cañon.

2 Although the final report refers to the “Big Cañon,” a preliminary summary of the Ives expedition published in 1859, two years before the release of the official version, was titled The Colorado Expedition: The Colorado of the West and the Country Bordering It—The Grand Cañon.
Photographer's notes: The towering geological formations of the Black Canyon—such as the way the sediments split at the top and form conical structures—strongly resemble those in Egloffstein's Big Cañon (right). The gothic pinnacle to the left of the main geological fracture (seen in the middle of the photograph) looks very similar to the central feature drawn by Egloffstein, especially when seen from the canyon floor.
got there, the images certainly matched Lieutenant Ives’s description of the lower Grand Canyon even if they didn’t match the canyon itself.

The sides of the tortuous cañon became loftier, and before long we were hemmed in by walls two thousand feet high . . . the corresponding depth and gloom of the gaping chasms into which we were plunging, imparted an unearthly character to a way that might have resembled the portals of the infernal regions.

I began collecting documentary evidence with the aim of restoring Egloffstein’s reputation, but I soon realized I would need photographs of the Black Canyon itself to compare with Egloffstein’s maligned landscapes. So last March and again in June, using the reports, maps, and drawings as a kind of historical field guide, and accompanied by photographer Lena Herzog, I traveled to the Black Canyon of the Gunnison in search of what Egloffstein saw.

In its narrowest section, the Black Canyon is more than twice as deep as it is wide. “No other North American canyon combines the depth, narrowness, sheerness, and somber countenance of the Black Canyon,” wrote Wallace R. Hansen of the U.S. Geological Survey. Once the eye has adjusted to the surreal view, the ear perceives the Gunnison’s roar, which is ever present even at the canyon’s rim, some 2,000 feet above the river.

On our first morning at the Black Canyon, we set out to find the vantage point for the panorama Big Cañon from Colorado Plateau. Our guide, Jeremy Werlin, a volunteer rescue climber at the canyon, led us to an overlook on the north rim known as Dead Horse Point. Not only do the pinnacles and steep side canyons here conform to Egloffstein’s panorama; so, too, do the pine trees on the ledges that protrude over the canyon. The plants of the lower Grand Canyon are a prickly cohort of Sonoran desert species—agave, barrel cactus, cholla, ironwood, mesquite, Mormon tea, and ocotillo—all adapted to the heat and aridity of the region. But jutting into the foreground of Big Cañon from Colorado Plateau is what appears to be an Engelmann spruce or Douglas fir, alpine

Photographer’s notes: The rock face of the opposite side of the canyon in the drawing can be correlated with the main features of the background in the photograph. Formations similar to those in the foreground of Egloffstein’s panoramas can easily be found in the Black Canyon. However, attempts to discover Egloffstein’s exact vantage points are complicated by the fact that neither drawing nor photography is an objective mimetic practice.
species that would wither on the dry benches of the inner Grand Canyon but that are common along the rim of the Black Canyon.

We had little doubt that Egloffstein’s panorama is situated in this section of the canyon, but we could not make the elements match perfectly. We could situate ourselves so that the canyon had the correct profile, but it lacked the rock outcrop and jutting tree in the foreground. When we moved to the outcrop, the view of the full sweep of the canyon was lost.

All around are signs of mass erosion. Not the slow, smooth scarring of the Grand Canyon but the explosive tearing away of huge columns of stone. Had a ledge fallen away in the intervening 150 years? Had Egloffstein synthesized key botanical and geological features in the foreground, in this case the rocks and trees, along with Dead Horse Point’s most encompassing background sweep—essentially loading the scene to offer an intensified vision of this section of the canyon?

The vantage point we found for the next Egloffstein panorama was a lower match. Paul Zaenger, a ranger at the Black Canyon, said the mittenlike stone towers in Big Cañon Near Diamond River strongly resembled the Great Pillars, spectacular formations visible from the south rim’s visitor center. When we got there, we climbed down to a stone platform on the canyon’s edge. The background of Egloffstein’s panorama came into alignment, and in the foreground we saw small rock projections that match those in the drawing almost perfectly. Beyond, the canyon opens in the same configuration depicted in the drawing, with the narrow side canyon and pillar on the left and the tapering V of the Narrows receding into the hazy distance on the right.

But how did Egloffstein get here from Dead Horse Point and the north rim? In a straight line, the

Photographer’s notes: Strangely, this was one of the most thrilling finds. How do you show in a drawing that you are facing not just an ordinary outcrop but the edge of the canyon? You have to draw the rocks in the foreground. I am certain that Egloffstein used a notebook rather than an easel to make these drawings. Just as we were, he was exhausted after long hikes and climbs and must have sat, or, more likely, lain on the ground to draw what he saw from the canyon’s edge: the rock face across (here, overlying arched) and the few inch-high rocks directly in front of him. Understanding that foreground rocks may not be comparable in scale to those on the opposite side of the canyon is important for determining the location of Egloffstein’s vantage points.

Big Cañon near Diamond River, by Friedrich von Egloffstein. Courtesy Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations; photograph © Lena Herzog

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distance between this vista and the pine-covered platforms of Big Cañon from Colorado Plateau is probably no more than half a mile. Tracing the rim, however, would have meant a difficult overland journey of at least fifty miles. With the party battling the cold and subsisting on horse steaks fried with tallow candles, a likelier explanation is that they took a far more direct route, dropping into the canyon and climbing to the other side.

The next day, we too climbed down into the canyon. In search of the riverside view that Egloffstein drew in Black Cañon, we hiked through a gully called Long Draw. The route is not technical, but it is extremely steep—dropping 1,800 feet over the course of a mile—and requires scrambling over large slabs. At the edge, a cold draft surges from the depths of the canyon.

As we descended, weird, impossibly balanced pillars rose above us, Gambel oak, box elder, gooseberry, willow, cumbine, and larkspur grow from the talus in the shadow of the ever deepening cut.1

About halfway down we stopped to rest. Two climbers draped in gear passed by, their quickdraws and cans clinking like wind chimes. "We heard who lived 150 years ago."

After two hours of careful hiking, we reached the bottom. Copious blooms of poison ivy grow between boulders the size of small houses. We had to shout to be heard over the torrent. Heavy snowpack in the West Elk and San Juan mountains had necessitated the release of huge quantities of water from the dams upstream in anticipation of the melt.

I scuttled on all fours to the top of a watersmoothed stone that projected into the current. The elements appeared to be in place and of a piece. The dark walls in the foreground were in shadow and the wall behind was illuminated. Here at the Narrows the river surges through a gap a mere forty feet wide.

As I studied the copy of Black Cañon I had brought along, two troubling discrepancies appeared: 

1In September 1869, as rumors spread that the expedition of John Wesley Powell had been lost in the Grand Canyon, a number of opportunists emerged, seeking to use their stories of intrigue to capitalize on the Grand Canyon fever sweeping the country. Among the procession of false seekers was Solomon Nunes Carvalho, who had accompanied the Frémont expedition and now presented his own impressions of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado—a place the party never visited. A short dispatch in the New York Times, dated September 4, 1869, reports on an exhibition of a painting of the Grand Canyon that Carvalho claimed to have made during the 1853 Frémont expedition. Carvalho's painting looked very much like pictures I had seen of the Narrows from the bottom of Long Draw, and an excellent wide-angle counterpart to Egloffstein's narrowly focused Black Canyon image. Was Carvalho looking to cash in on the misfortunes of the Powell expedition? Or was he merely confused—as I believe the congressional report makers were—by the overlapping names of the two rivers?

"When Egloffstein drew his first pictures of the Grand Canyon they reached to the heavens and dropped to the depths like gorges out of Dore's underworld." —William Goertzmann, Exploration and Empire
emerged. The first is obvious: we were on the wrong side of the river. In the image, the viewer is clearly situated on the right bank, whereas we were on the left. The other bank might as well have been another country.

But according to Paul Zaenger, before upstream dams were built in the 1960s and 1970s, the midwinter flow of the Gunnison at the Narrows would have been a fraction of what confronts us today. Directly across the river is a steep chute called Echo Canyon, a direct route to the south rim. Did Egloffstein use Long Draw and Echo Canyon as entrance and exit points, crossing the Gunnison by wading or hopping over boulders now submerged?

The second discrepancy was subtler. From a distance, the elements seemed to align—the river sweeping from right to left across the black face of the cliff. About halfway up the prowlike rock on the right of the Narrows is an inconspicuous notch. The notch is also present in Egloffstein’s image—but it’s on the left side.

Could the drawing have been made on the opposite side of the keyhole before us—upstream from the Narrows? The boat in the image (itself a troubling anomaly because Frémont had no boats on the expedition) may offer an important clue. The man pulling the boat ashore seems to be straining against the current, which means that such a view could have been obtained only on the upstream side.

But how did the boat get there in the first place? It might have been added later by an unknown hand in Washington to conform to Ives’s narrative, which mentions moving upriver by skiff after the loss of the steamboat. Or perhaps Egloffstein added it himself as a means of showing the direction of the current and, more importantly for our purposes, a way to define his position in relation to the Narrows.

As the noon sun crested the opposite wall, the Black Canyon’s inner gorge was painted a dazzling silver. We could not linger, but I was confident that we had found strong matches for Egloffstein’s Big Cañon vantage points and strong correspondences for his “gothic” spires and pinnacles, which are not products of a Eurocentric romanticism but defining features of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

Why didn’t Egloffstein speak out about the cooption of his images? What happened to his drawings of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado? These are questions that still need answers. But it is time to clear Egloffstein of charges of schizophrenia and artistic fraud, and to place the master mapmaker where he belongs—among the West’s first great landscape artists.