

Four mammoth c-type photographs, on Kodak paper.

ABU DHABI FROM ABOVE

[Group of four aerial photographs of Abu Dhabi].

Author
LANDSAT

Publication date
1984-1985.

Publisher

Publication place

Physical description
Four mammoth c-type photographs, on Kodak paper.

Dimensions
855 by 805mm. (33.75 by 31.75 inches).

Notes
A group of four mammoth aerial photographs of Abu Dhabi, most likely commissioned for a construction firm, taken at a point when the city was in the midst of rapid development.

Aerial photography and cartography share a deep artistic and scientific relationship rooted in the ways both practices translate the earth’s surface into visual form. While cartography traditionally relies on symbolic representation and abstraction, aerial photography offers a direct visual record of landscapes. Together, they create a dialogue between realism and interpretation, between the literal

and the symbolic, and between the observable world and human patterns of meaning.

Shared Visual Languages
Both aerial photography and cartography engage with scale, perspective, and spatial accuracy. An aerial photograph, taken from above, flattens the landscape into a plane, much like a map. This bird's-eye view eliminates the immediacy of ground-level perception, replacing it with a detached, omniscient perspective that emphasizes form, pattern, and relation. Cartographers have historically used this vertical perspective as the foundation of map-making, abstracting geographic features from either direct observation, surveys, or – later – the photographic record.

This shared viewpoint has artistic implications. Seen from above, landscapes organize themselves into patterns of symmetry, rhythm, and contrast. Agricultural fields resemble geometric mosaics; rivers carve graphic lines; and cities display intricate grids or organic webs. Both cartographic drawings and aerial photographs highlight this aesthetic of order and abstraction, often blurring the boundary between functional technique and visual art.

From Documentation to Interpretation
A twentieth-century shift brought aerial photography into the realm of cartographic practice as tools like photogrammetry were developed. Photographs became raw data for map-making, yet artists also recognized their visual power as independent works, not merely technical resources. Similarly, maps have always walked a line between utility and artistry. Medieval maps, with their elaborate illustrations, and modern artistic maps that emphasize concept over accuracy, demonstrate how mapping is as much an act of storytelling as it is one of measurement. Aerial photographs extend this tradition, creating images that are truthful records yet still demand interpretation, inviting viewers to consider the aesthetic and symbolic qualities of land.

Both practices involve choices of framing, emphasis, and omission. A cartographer simplifies a world full of infinite data into a legible system of symbols, colours, and boundaries. An aerial photographer frames particular regions, angles, and moments that highlight shapes invisible from the ground. In this way, both acts turn complex realities into constructed narratives. Artistically, this creates parallels with painting: just as a painter emphasizes certain features to reveal essence or mood, both cartographer and aerial photographer reveal the hidden structures of place.

Landsat
Landsat is the world's longest-running land-observing satellite program, launched in 1972 and jointly managed by NASA and the US Geological Survey[astronomy +1]. Its satellites capture multispectral images every 16 days, enabling monitoring of agriculture, climate change, and disasters, with all resulting data available to the public for free.

Original Landsat colour prints from the early years of the program (1970s–1980s) are quite rare, especially as stand-alone colour photographic prints and mosaics, because they were produced in limited quantities for government, scientific, and select public uses, rather than commercial distribution or mass retail sales.

Individual Landsat colour prints—especially large-format mosaics or photoprints from the 1970s and early 1980s—were expensive to produce and priced accordingly (large colour prints could cost hundreds to over a thousand dollars, even in the 1980s), restricting their circulation.

Bibliography

Provenance

Price: £80000

Inventory reference: 24376

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