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In this generously-illustrated book, Watters (author of American Gardens, 1890-1930), an artist, lecturer, and expert on American house and garden cultures, surveys the midlife career and garden photographs of Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952), a pioneering American female photojournalist, who studied art at the Académie Julian in Paris and the Art Students League in Washington, D.C..

As an aspiring photographer of the Progressive era, who established her Washington portrait studio in 1894, Johnston portrayed well-known individuals as well as other Americans and social movements. During the early twentieth century, when landscape gardening became professionalized and wealthy individuals beautified their estates, showcasing them as worthy examples of the ideals of social reformation and the Arts & Crafts movement, she photographed estates and gardens in the Northeast. Her career and photographs manifested the ideals of the movement to beautify America and its cities by means of gardens and gardening, but they also reflected Johnston’s attempts to raise her status to the level of an artist and garden photography to an art form. Not only did Johnston document the achievements of wealthy owners and landscape gardeners, but she also elevated garden photography by means of her artistic training, sensibilities, techniques, media, and practices. She sold her carefully composed and hand-painted works, published her garden photographs in magazines and professional journals, exhibited her collections, and lectured to the members of prominent architectural and gardening organizations.

In this first book to examine Johnston’s midlife career and her garden photographs within their artistic, historical, and social contexts, Watters covers his subject in three essays as well as sets forth a catalog of plates of 250 of Johnston’s colored lantern slides of urban and suburban gardens, which have not been seen since the photographer used them to illustrate her lectures. The author selected them from the more than 1,100 lantern slides by Johnston now preserved at the Library of Congress. He organizes the plates according to the five collections the photographer formed while working and traveling in the United States and Europe: gardens of the East, West, Cities and Suburbs, Old World, and South.

Well-documented, with notes to figures and plates, addenda listing Johnston's “Our American Gardens” and “California Gardens” slides as well as the contents of her library, endnotes, and a selected bibliography, this scholarly, accessible publication, with beautiful reproductions, will be of considerable interest to students, scholars, and others. A significant addition to the literature on photographers, garden history, and the fine and decorative arts, it is highly recommended for large public, academic, and special libraries.

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