



Charles A. Zimmerman's stereograph, "Home of the Frost King," about 1875 (MHS COLLECTIONS)

Home of the Frost King



WHEN WILSON ALWYN BENTLEY of Jericho, Vermont, died in 1931, he had earned the nickname "Snowflake" by creating over 5,000 photographs of individual snow crystals. Bentley's catalog of images, made with the optical assistance of a microscope, suggested that, as similar as they may seem, no two snow crystals (flakes are accumulations of crystals) were identical.

No one since Bentley has been able to disprove his hypothesis, though even a sample of 5,000 is an insignificant fraction of the snowfall on a single driveway in January—or on the branches of Charles Zimmerman's photograph here (especially when doubled, in the stereoscopic format). Shovelers, scientists, and sky-gazing philosophers alike must wonder at the possibility of infinite variations of six-pointed objects: there must be a duplicate in there somewhere, but who's ever going to prove it?

Some of Bentley's images show damaged crystals;

their symmetrical perfection was marred as they fell to earth. The success of Zimmerman's early quest for three-dimensionality depended on the differences between the two cursorily identical images. Look closely at spatial relationships and you will see how one crystal-laden twig crosses another at different places in the two views. Placed in the hand-held viewer (no red and green glasses in the nineteenth century) and properly focused, this card would convey an enchanting illusion of depth, as the branch would appear to be emerging from the picture plane.

One-hundred-and-thirty years later, we are still trying to get photographs (and films) to be ever more like life, though perhaps the best way to enhance this picture's verisimilitude would be to view it while standing next to an open freezer.

—GEORGE SLADE

George Slade, formerly the artistic director of the Minnesota Center for Photography, is currently the curator and program manager at the Photographic Resource Center in Boston. His blog entries can be found by searching the web for re:photographica.



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