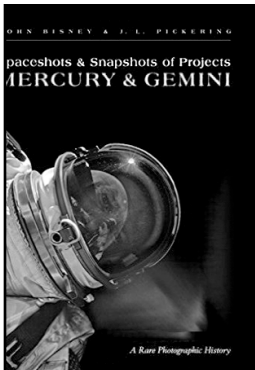


BOOK REVIEW

SPACESHOTS AND SNAPSHOTS OF PROJECTS MERCURY AND GEMINI: A RARE PHOTOGRAPHIC HISTORY



by John Bisney and J.L. Pickering

University of New Mexico Press, 2015

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Who doesn't enjoy glancing through a beautifully printed coffee table book of space photographs? It is nearly impossible not to enjoy flipping through the glossy pages of a large format book with rich color images showing us some of the wonders explored by people over the last half-century of human spaceflight. In the case of *Spaceshots and Snapshots*, this new take on a classic format gives reason to consider retiring the term "coffee table book" entirely in favor of something more meaningful. Self-proclaimed spaceflight enthusiasts John Bisney and J.L. Pickering (a journalist and photography collector, respectively) present readers with rarely seen photographs of those critical first steps into space, as seen through the eyes of curious observers at various spaceflight and other facilities. The visual narrative employed by the authors reminds us not only of the sublimity of astronaut photography, but also the thousands of people who made spaceflight possible thanks to the meticulous efforts of the authors to identify nearly every figure in the selected photographs.

For students of visual culture of the space age, the truly awe-inspiring aspect of this book is the authors' nearly unprecedented access to sources of photographic material. Drawing on their own collections and those inside and outside traditional NASA circles, Bisney and Pickering have located some of the more unique perspectives on mission preparations and operations, providing a fly-on-the-wall-type experience usually not available in traditional photo essays and coffee table books about spaceflight. While they frame each mission chapter with the iconic image of that flight, the richness of the supporting images and descriptions give a full picture of those missions as rarely seen by outsiders. That being said, the authors' choices for even these "iconic" stage setting images is highly

subjective (the authors admit as much in their introduction and their method for making selections). Few would consider their choice for Scott Carpenter's Mercury-Atlas 7 flight to be the most obvious one to represent that flight, but most authors would be hard pressed to identify such an image for most of the early or rarely discussed missions of these two preparatory programs for Apollo. Key missions such as *Gemini IV*, *Gemini IX-A*, and *Gemini XII* are thoroughly covered, but, as the authors acknowledge, that is thanks to the high degree of attention paid to those missions generally. Also somewhat missing from their narrative is the life of their characters outside of work with their families. Most other popular representations of the lives of astronauts make it abundantly clear they had little time for their wives and children, but as the setting for most of the selected photographs in this book are spaceflight facilities, that omission is unstated by the authors and yet sadly absent.

A byproduct of so many behind-the-scenes images is the opening of a window onto the personalities of those commonly viewed as icons and heroes, as well as those dedicated to making human spaceflight possible. The sense of humor of many is evident in posed shots (the prime and backup crew image for *Gemini VII*, upper left corner of page 124, begs for more explanation) and supplementary graphics alike (finally, an image of the infamous Wolfie's restaurant that supplied John Young's *Gemini III* corned beef sandwich). Though generally formulaic in organization, this broadly appealing set of photographs enhances our appreciation for this formative period of space exploration.

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