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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Images of Distant Times and Climes



Jules Gervais-Courtellemont's autochrome print 'The Gardens of Hammam-Rhira, Algeria,' at the Steven Kasher Gallery.

By WILLIAM MEYERS

Autochromes: Early Color Masterpieces from National Geographic

■ Steven Kasher Gallery
521 W. 23rd St., (212) 966-3978
Through July 10

The autochrome process, the first successful method for producing color photos, produced Impressionist-like images with delicate colors. Unfortunately, those hues faded over time, and so did the method; it was superseded by better technology in the 1930s. The autochromes at the Kasher Gallery come from the National Geographic Society, one of the great sponsors of ethnographic photography. National Geographic stored the 4-by-5 inch glass plates in darkness, which preserved them; for this exhibition, they were scanned and made into 11-by-14 inch prints.

Of the 63 images on display, about one-third are by Jules Gervais-Courtellemont (1863-1931), who had an intuitive understanding of color. His pic-

tures from rural France and Spain, from North Africa and India, are simple and understated. "Portrait of Young Spanish Woman, Lagartera, Spain, ca. 1914" is classic in its direct confrontation of the subject, the muted skin tones, and the bits of red that highlight the details of her bustier. The "Young Rugmaker, Rabat, Morocco, ca. 1913" sits barefoot on the door sill of his shop; the picture gains authenticity from the greens, blues, reds and yellows of the yarns than hang behind him. The mottled clothes of the peasants of "Grape Harvest, Ay, Champagne, France, ca. 1927" contrast with the greens of the fields and blue-grays of the clouds.

There are other fine images, such as "Zulu Tribesman, South Africa, ca. 1910" by Franklin Prince Knott (1854-1930), with its variegated brown flesh tones, and the equally sensitive "Boy Actor, Java, Indonesia, ca. 1928" by W. Robert Moore (1899-1968), with its dramatic red sash. In all, the softened autochrome colors enhance the notion of distant places and times.