

PHOTOGRAPHY

From gangland to Hollywood

Los Angeles: Portrait of a City

Edited by Jim Heimann. Essays by Kevin Starr
Taschen £44.99, pp572



What feels like the entire history of Los Angeles is laid out in this great slab of a book, one of the gloriously opulent productions in which photography publisher Taschen specialises. The first known photo of LA was taken in 1862, 12 years after California's accession to the Union, when the city was little more than a ramshackle collection of smallholdings. By the start of the 20th century, elegant boulevards had sprung up in its centre, as well as a smattering of villas in the surrounding hills. The industry that has come to define LA – film – got going soon after, and there are plenty of scenes here of Hollywood grinding into gear: shots of early film studios, of the inaugural Academy awards, of forgotten silent movies being filmed downtown. A tawdry glamour has long been one of LA's hallmarks, and this too is much in evidence – in the various shots of strip joints and bunny girls, as well as in this 1957 photo of Jayne Mansfield reclining amid novelty bottles made (for what purpose, exactly?) in her bikini-clad image. Yet LA's more disturbing undercurrents feature prominently too – there are shots of Prohibition-era gangland killings and of the racial riots that convulsed the city in 1992. Artfully mixing photos of the famous with more everyday scenes (early drive-in restaurants, Venice boardwalk in the 50s), and not neglecting the city's often remarkable architecture, this compilation reveals the life of the City of Angels in all its weirdness and wonder. **WILLIAM SKIDELSKY**

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