

EDWARD WESTON RETROSPECTIVE AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A major retrospective of photographs by Edward Weston (1886-1958) will be on view at The Museum of Modern Art from January 29 through March 30. The exhibition, consisting of more than 250 works, is made possible by grants from SCM Corporation and the National Endowment for the Arts. It explores Weston's important and unique contribution to the visual arts of this century during five decades of his distinguished career. Willard Van Dyke, well-known photographer, filmmaker and critic, and Weston's colleague for many years, is Guest Director of the exhibition, which will travel throughout the country after its New York showing. John Szarkowski, Director of the Museum's Department of Photography, installed the exhibition.

During the 1920s, Weston, living in Mexico and California, developed what came to be known as a "straight" approach to photography in reaction to the so-called pictorial photography that marked his own first work and was practiced by many of his contemporaries.

Describing Weston's innovative approach to the art of photography, Van Dyke says in the exhibition text: "As he became more secure he was able to present his subjects with a minimum of the literary content that characterized his earlier work. He found radical ways of making pictures. His approach became basic, simple, forthright.... The direct deliverance of the subject is deceptively simple; it challenges the viewer to make his own interpretation. In his new pictures the object is all there, complete within the confines of the frame; it is clearly what it is, a shell, a pepper, a woman's body. Yet it is more. Whatever it may be, it also partakes of all other things because Weston saw its universal qualities...."

Mr. Van Dyke continues: "Over a period of many years Weston photographed on Point Lobos [California]. He returned time after time after time, searching, discovering, and rediscovering, and the photographs he made there are among his most satisfying. It was here that he learned to deal with what was specific and unique to his subject in its time and place, without qualification or reservation.... It was here that he matured as an artist. His assertiveness and self-conscious artistry gone, he was able to present the world with works that are among the finest photographs ever done."

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Weston was born in Highland Park, Ill., in 1886. He became a professional photographer as a young man and in 1911, aged 25, he opened his first studio in California. In 1922 he made a brief trip to Ohio and New York City where he met Stieglitz, Paul Strand and Charles Sheeler. That same year he exhibited his photographs in Mexico City, where they were enthusiastically received, and in 1923 he moved there to live and work.

While earning a precarious living doing commercial portraiture he continued to develop a new approach to photography in his independent work. During his stay he became friends with the Mexican artists of the revolutionary period, whose portraits are in the exhibition: Diego Rivera, Carlos Merida, José Clemente Orozco and Jean Charlot. Paradoxically, these painters' appreciative discussion of his work did much to liberate his photographs from painterly influences, and this liberation was encouraged by his discovery of the unselfconsciousness in folk art.

In 1926 Weston returned to California, which remained his base for the rest of his life. In 1937 he became the first photographer to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship which enabled him to travel and photograph through California and the West. In 1941 he traveled through the South and the East photographing for a special edition of Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass published by the Limited Editions Book Club.

Commenting further on Weston's work from the late 30s onwards, John Szarkowski has pointed out that it is more complex, more subtle, less obviously formal, richer (and less clear) in its allusions. "The great prototypical pictures of the twenties and the early thirties were characteristically constructed of a discrete figure against a flat ground: head or cloud against the sky, pepper or shell or nude in a shallow neutral space, rock on beach. From about his fiftieth year, Weston's pictures more and more describe a space that is continuous not only in depth, but (by implication) continuous beyond the rectangle that defines the picture plane. Landscape became the most challenging of photographic problems for Weston, for in the landscape there could be no simple apposition of the object and the background -- in landscape there was no background, nor was there a given boundary to the subject, as there is to a pepper."

Much of the material in the show is unfamiliar, some of it unpublished, despite the number of portfolios and books of his work that have been published and exhibited. In a few instances totally unknown photographs were discovered. A platinum print of his son Chandler Weston, asleep in his shop, was found in a store in California by Weston's youngest son, Cole, who is executor of his father's estate. Another early photograph taken in Chicago, which Edward Weston had given to a woman who worked in his office,

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was found by Dody Thompson, an apprentice and former daughter-in-law. Reviewing the entire body of the work made for Leaves of Grass, Van Dyke found many photographs far superior to those used in the book -- some of which he has included in the show. In other cases, Van Dyke has chosen portraits taken at the same sitting as more familiar prints because he feels they have more impact today than the often-reproduced ones originally selected by Weston and the sitter.

The exhibition opens with a group of early platinum prints, including the Whistlerian Prologue to a Sad Spring, a misty figure of a woman by the misty shadow of a tree, the torso of his son Neil, a cloud. Also among the work from the 20s exhibited, in which his own new style is seen emerging, are backs of nudes and photographs made of Mexican villages, of folk art objects and portraits of friends, including Jack Black, a burglar-writer.

Van Dyke says: "Through his life Weston found forms that are repeated in nature.... Even a casual viewer recognizes that he saw relationships between rocks, clouds, vegetables, shells, sand dunes, the human body." Six portraits of peppers are shown in a row; one group of pictures includes a white radish, a bunch of bananas, a cabbage, a bedpan and a model for a mold and a nude. In another gallery of work primarily from the early 20s, nudes and details of the human body -- knees, torsos, legs, are shown with a selection of his sand dune landscapes and cloud pictures. A group taken in Death Valley in the late 30s of landscapes and beaches is followed by a group devoted to cemeteries and burned, decayed and abandoned buildings, poignant though formally beautiful.

Weston made portraits throughout his life. Photographs of his sons, his wife Charis and other friends appear throughout the exhibition, and of artists and photographers. In his later portraits such as that of William Edmunson, naive sculptor, the subject is shown in a setting related to his profession. The exhibition concludes with photographs taken at Point Lobos where Weston photographed details of trees and rocks and beaches. The last picture in the show was taken there in 1948, ten years

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before his death of Parkinson's disease.

In 1946 Nancy Newhall directed a major exhibition of Weston's work at The Museum of Modern Art. A special edition of Edward Weston: The Flame of Recognition, edited by Mrs. Newhall, has been re-issued by Aperture Press on the occasion of this retrospective.

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