

**Edward Weston,  
American Photographer  
1886-1958**

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Edward Henry Weston, widely regarded as one of the premier photographers of the twentieth century, was born on March 24, 1886, in Highland Park, IL, a suburb of Chicago. Weston's father was a physician; his mother died while Weston was very young, so that he was primarily raised by his older sister. An indifferent student at best, Weston drifted through school until he was sixteen, when a belated birthday gift of a Kodak Bulls-Eye No. 2 box camera from his father changed his life. Photography immediately enthralled him, though he soon realized the limitations of his initial equipment and saved his money for a better camera, a 5x7-inch ground glass model with a tripod. He set up a darkroom and began spending as much time possible photographing the world around him.

Almost none of Weston's early work survives, though in the surviving work Weston's eye for composition is evident. *Lake Michigan, Chicago* (1904) and *Spring, Washington Park, Chicago* (1903) both show a structure and organization that lifts this obviously amateur work out of the realm of the ordinary.

In 1906, Weston moved to California after a visit to his sister May in Tropic (now Glendale). He began to make his living first as a surveyor, then as an itinerant photographer, which suited him well. However, that position offered an uncertain living, and he recognized the need for further study in photography. Thus, in 1909 he briefly returned to the Chicago area for the only formal art training of his life: he attended the Illinois College of Photography to develop the skills and methodology that would carry his artistic vision forward.

Upon his return to California, he married Flora May Chandler, a friend of his sister, and began working as a printer and cameraman in established studios in Los Angeles. He set up his own studio in 1911 and began specializing in portraiture. His skill at this work was superb. However, he regarded this work as strictly commercial, for the intent of making a living and supporting his family, and often begrudged the long hours at the tasks that kept him from his "personal work."

The popular photographic movement of this time, "pictorial photography," treated photographic images as meritorious solely on their artistic intent. Creation of such images required extensive working of the negative during the development and printing phases, leading to photographs that resembled etchings or drawings rather than realistic reproductions of their subjects. Although Weston showed himself a master of the genre, he began to abandon this method of working after a decade. This was the first move towards the

preoccupation with form that characterizes his later works. Again, little of Weston's work from this era survives to the present, as he destroyed many prints and negatives in the early 1920s due to his dissatisfaction with his work. Of the work, primarily portraiture, that still exists, the images are characterized by a soft, gentle focus that nonetheless emphasizes rather than detracting from Weston's careful compositions.

Probably the greatest influence on Weston's work at this time was master photographer Alfred Stieglitz, who led the procession away from pictorial photography into modern realism. During a 1922 meeting with Stieglitz in New York, Weston showed his initial forays into realism, including his recent industrial photographs of the Armco smokestacks in Middletown, Ohio. Stieglitz's positive reception of this work encouraged Weston to continue with his explorations into form.

As Weston's photographic emphasis was changing, so was his personal life. By now he was estranged from his wife Flora, largely due to his prodigious interest in other women. He established long-term sexual relationships with at least two of these women: Tina Modotti, his protégé and a photographer in her own right, in the 1920s, and Charis Wilson (whom he married after divorcing Flora in 1937) in the 1930s. Several other women served as models for his photography at various times, in particular for his various series of nudes, and he very likely had liaisons with some of them.

In 1923, Weston, along with Tina Modotti and his son Chandler, moved to Mexico, following in the footsteps of many other American artists and writers dissatisfied with post-World War I America. For most of the next three years, Weston and Modotti were part of the thriving Mexican arts scene led by Diego Rivera. Among Weston's most notable work of this period are two striking portraits, close-up profiles of Rivera's wife Guadalupe Marín de Rivera and of Mexican senator Miguel Hernández Galván. In addition, he made a number of nude photographs of Modotti and of Anita Brenner, focusing on sculptural form to the extent that in some of the pictures, the image is not immediately recognizable as a female body. Other images, including *Excusado, Mexico* (1925), his photograph of a toilet bowl as sculpture, also show the continuation of his exploration into form.

In 1926, disillusioned, Weston left Mexico for the last time. On his return to California, he continued his work with the nude female form, moving from there into his famous series of seashell images and then into his pictures of vegetable, whole forms as well as cut structures. In both, he photographed the

objects as extreme close-ups to best capture the beauty and meaning of the sculptural forms, challenging both his technical skills and his artistic eye. The subjects themselves are often all but unrecognizable for what they are, like many of his nudes. The pictures thus force the viewer to focus on shape and contrast without preconceived notions interfering with the perception of the image itself.

Weston moved to Carmel, California, in 1929, where he would live the rest of his life. This move led to his initial explorations of landscape photography, which still retained his emphasis on form and shape. Point Lobos, near his home, became a favorite working location, and its cypress trees and rocks became the subjects of many of his finest photographs.

Shortly after Weston's move to Carmel, he became a founding member of Willard Van Dyke's Group *f/64*, an informal society devoted to the promotion of "pure photography" in opposition to the remnants of the pictorial tradition. Other members included Ansel Adams, Imogen Cunningham, and Sonia Noskowiak, all friends and contemporaries of Weston. This short-lived (disbanding in 1935) society influenced modern photography far beyond its lifetime.

From Point Lobos in the early 1930s, Weston's landscapes branched out into the "open landscapes" of New Mexico in 1934, followed by the series of images of the sand dunes at Oceano, California. Some of these images were strictly landscape, but in others he combined his interest in the shifting form of the dunes with his continued focus on the form of the female body, producing a number of photographs of Charis Wilson's nude body on the sands.

In turn, this landscape work led to a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1937-1939, during which time Weston made more than 1,500 negatives as he and Charis (whom he finally married during this time) traveled over 35,000 miles by automobile throughout California. The resultant images from such diverse locations as Death Valley, the northern California coast, Yosemite National Park, are regarded as some of Weston's finest work. Charis Wilson chronicled this epic journey in the 1940 book *California and the West*, illustrated by ninety-six of Weston's best images from this journey.

The beginning of World War II brought Weston's creative work to a crashing halt. In 1941, Weston and Charis had been traveling across the United States working on a series of photographs to illustrate a new edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* to be published by the Limited Editions Club. The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7 brought them hurriedly back home to the California

coast, where they both plunged into civil defense work. Weston did work on printing the images he had taken for the Limited Editions Club during this time. However, he was essentially unable to do any new work, as his beloved Point Lobos was closed, and the use of the large view-camera type of photographic equipment that Weston favored was frowned upon because of the war.

The end of World War II also brought the end of Weston's marriage to Charis Wilson, shortly before a large retrospective exhibit of his work, 267 pieces in all, opened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, an exhibit three years in the making. The exhibit circulated to nine museums across the country after the close of the New York showing.

Weston began to experiment with color photography in late 1946, at the urging of George Waters of the Eastman Kodak Company. Kodak wanted a color picture of the Monterey Bay area to use in its advertising, and Weston's familiarity with the area as well as his skill with black-and-white work made him the obvious choice to create such an image. Although reluctant at first, Weston finally agreed to make the attempt, and was surprised and delighted at the results – he felt that this opened a whole new world to explore.

Weston's work in color, much of it revisiting his earlier favorite black and white subject matter, showed much promise, but was sadly short-lived. He was forced to give up photography little more than a year later after he began working in color, due to the ravages of Parkinson's disease. In that short time, he foresaw the potential of color photography as an art form, but emphasized that it would complement, never replace, black-and-white photography.

Instead, he spent the final years of his life supervising the planned printing of 1000 negatives that he considered his best work, funded by a \$6000 contribution from an anonymous friend. As he was unable to do the printing himself, he entrusted the job to his son Brett, himself a photographer of some renown. Of the 1000 planned images, Brett actually produced sets of eight prints each from a total of 838 negatives. Weston died at Carmel, CA, on January 1, 1958. Fittingly, his ashes were scattered on the Pacific Ocean from Point Lobos by his four sons.

## Bibliography

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