

# Edward Weston & The Flame of Recognition

“Dear Papa,  
Received the camera in good shape.  
It’s a dandy...I think I can make it work all right.”  
-Edward Weston, age 16

Edward Weston shot with a minimum of equipment, used the smallest aperture on the camera, and he almost never retouched or cropped his negatives. His images are realistic, sharp and beautiful. He tried to get the the quality of his subject matter “rendered with the utmost exactness: Stone is hard, bark is rough, flesh is alive.” The exactness he captured surpassed documentary realism, because it was united with a special eye for design.

By keeping his aperture at the smallest setting, Weston captured the subtleties of design and could come away with a photograph of an object that became a study in shape, line, texture and form. Yet while detail was important, it could also be submerged to draw attention to the shapes created by shadows and bright backgrounds, for an impersonal study of pattern. “The photographer’s most important and likewise most difficult task is not learning to manage his camera, or develop, or to print. It is learning to see photographically – that is, learning to see his subject matter in terms of the capacities of his tools and processes, so that he can instantaneously translate the elements and values in a scene before him into the photograph he wants to make.”

## The Flame of Recognition

The flame started first by amazement over subject matter, that flame which only a great artist can have \_\_– not the emotional pleasure of the layman – but the intuitive understanding and recognition relating obvious reality to the esoteric, must be confined to a form within which it can burn with a focused intensity: otherwise it flares, smokes and is lost like in an open bonfire.

Clouds, torso, shells, peppers, trees, rocks, smokestacks are but interdependent, interrelated parts of a whole, which is life.

Life rhythms felt in no matter what, become symbols of the whole.

The creative force in man recognizes and records these rhythms with the medium most suitable to him, to the object, or the moment, feeling the cause, the life within the outer form. Recording unfelt facts by acquired rule, results in sterile inventory.

To see the Thing Itself is essential: The Quintessence revealed direct without the fog of impressionism – the casual noting of a superficial phase, or transitory mood.

This then: to photograph a rock, have it not look like a rock, but be more than a rock. – Significant presentation – not interpretation.

My way of working – I start with no preconceived idea – discovery excites me to focus – then rediscovery through the lens – final form of presentation seen on the ground glass, the finished print pre-visioned complete in every detail of texture, movement proportion, before exposure – the shutter's release automatically and finally fixes my conception, allowing no after manipulation – the ultimate end, the print, is but a duplication of all that I saw and felt through my camera.

...photography is not all seeing in the sense that the eyes see. Our vision, a binocular one, is in a continuous state of flux, while the camera captures and fixes forever (unless the damn prints fade!) a single, isolated, condition of the moment. Besides, we use lenses of various focal lengths to purposely exaggerate actual seeing, and we often “overcorrect” color for the same reason. In printing we carry on our willful distortion of fact by using contrasty papers which give results quite different from the scene or object as it was in nature.

This, we must agree is all legitimate procedure: but it is not “seeing” literally, it is done with a reason, with creative imagination.

I never try to limit myself by theories. I do not question right or wrong approach when I am interested or amazed, – impelled to work. I do not fear logic, I dare to be irrational, or really never consider whether I am not. This keeps me fluid, open to fresh impulse, free from formulae: and precisely because I have no formulae – the public who know my work is often surprised, the critics, who all, or most of them, have their pet formulae are disturbed, and my friends distressed.

I would say to any artist, – don't be repressed in your work – dare to experiment – consider any urge – if in a new direction all the better – as a gift from the gods not to be denied by convention or a prior concept. Our time is becoming more and more bound by logic, absolute rationalism: this is a strait jacket! – it is

the boredom and narrowness which rises directly from mediocre mass thinking. The great scientist dares to differ from accepted “facts,” – think irrationally – let the artist do likewise. And photographers, even those, or especially those, taking new or different paths should never become crystallized in the theories through which they advance. Let the eyes work from inside out– do not imitate “photographic painting,” in a desire to be photographic!

Whenever I can feel a Bach fugue in my work I know I have arrived.

I am an adventurer on a voyage of discovery, ready to receive fresh impressions, eager for fresh horizon, not in the spirit of a militant conqueror to impose myself or my ideas, but to identify myself in, and unify with, whatever I am able to recognize as significantly part of me: the “me” of universal rhythms.

The painters have no copyright on modern art!...I believe in, and make no apologies for, photography: it is the most important graphic medium of our day. It does not have to be, indeed cannot be – compared to painting – it has different means and aims. (When the article title, Edward Weston, Artist was sent to him in a gallery, he circled the word “Artist” with the comment: “Cut, or change to ‘Photographer’, of which title I am very proud.”)

Ansel (Adams) does not agree with me in hanging old “historical” work. (Only the best you have ever done, only examples of the photography you believe in should be shown.) Well then I say, why a retrospective at all? I think a presentation of one’s growth of interest & importance – even early corn–

To all critics, pro or con – my work or anyone’s work - in photography, painting, sculpture or music, I say (digo yo) you can’t explain away its very meaning - its reason for existence.

As for Death as a theme – it certainly didn’t start with the dead man in the Colorado desert. Before 1920 I did skulls and dead Joshua trees on the Mohave desert. But then – as now – death was not a theme – it was just a part of life – simple as that.

Edward Weston

adapted from personal notes and *Life Library of Photography*, Great Photographers