

Permanent Collection work:

Edward Weston

Nude, 1936

gelatin silver print

Helen Johnston Collection, Focus Gallery Collection

6.63.1989

Essay written by student, Alicia Cave, Spring 2001

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History of Photography
Museum Assignment

Edward Weston is widely known for his classical approach to photography. He was born in 1886, in Highland Park Illinois. When he was sixteen years old, he dropped out of school. Soon afterwards, in 1902, his father gave him a Kodak camera. This gift sparked the enthusiasm for photography that drove him throughout his life. He eventually moved to southern California in 1908, when he married Flora Chandler. He began his career as a commercial portrait photographer, practicing the popular trend of pictorialism, the softening and blurring of images to create a more aesthetically pleasing effect. Photo historian Peter C. Bunnell divides Weston's career into two distinct periods, calling the period from 1918 to 1923 a transitional period.¹ By the end of this period, Weston had been introduced to an intellectual group, known as f/64 (a reference to clarity made with a lens setting on a camera). F/64 radically transformed his soft pictorialism into the hard-edged, monumentally formal images that characterize his work, as we know it today.² This group of intellectuals and artists consisted included

¹ Margaret Denny Coesfeld, Robinson Jeffers and Edward Weston: The Primacy of Perception, (California: San Francisco State University, 1987), 41.

² Terence Pits, Edward Weston: 1886-1958, (Koln, Taschen, 1999), 15.

members such as Johan Hagermeyer, Margarethe Mather, Ramiel McGehee, and Tina Modotti.³ Weston's involvement and association with these intellectuals shaped his transition from commercial photography to fine art photography, capable of exploring both physical and transcendental dimensions in his work.

Weston drew much of his inspiration from the nineteenth century New England visionaries known as the Transcendentalists. Weston believed that reality consisted of that which we see, as well as that which is beyond. The physical world has potential to reveal the power of the nominal world beyond. His intellectual photographs brought the glory of the transcendental world to the senses of the common individual. He was determined "to know things in their very essence."⁴ According to Weston, sight, a sensory notion of reality, could provide one with only a glimpse of actual reality.⁵ Thus, only the intellect can only reveal a true sense of reality. Weston wanted to abstract his images in such a way that they could be removed from natural association, and thus allow the viewer to respond solely to the image's aesthetic form. Weston often borrowed the quote from the romantic poet William Blake, "Man is led to believe a lie, when he sees with, not through the eye."⁶ For Weston, photography joined the sensory act of sight, with the intellectual act of perception, allowing one to transcend everyday life to a metaphysical reality.

Weston's *Nude* from 1930 describes the human form in a pure sense. Weston writes in *The Daybooks*, "I am stimulated to work with the nude body because of the infinite combinations of lines, which are present with every move." In this photo of the

³ Coesfeld, 41.

⁴ David Peeler, "Power, Autonomy, and Weston's Imagery: A Balancing Act," *History of Photography*, 15 (Autumn 1991), 194.

⁵ Peeler, 196.

Nude, one can see the delight Weston takes in focusing on the intersecting lines formed by the woman's folded pose. The combination of sharp edges, the focus on the effects of the body's lines, as well as the overall composition layout, create a sense of a static moment, captured in film. The static nature of the photo, as well as the hidden view of the torso, tend to de-emphasize any erotic overtones associated with the nude form, and instead, highlight the beauty of the form itself. The viewer is confronted with a faceless figure in an undefined setting. The model's anonymity, the shadows' fracturing effects on the body, as well as the undefined setting, force the viewer to focus on the shapes that come together to form the body. In this sense, Weston highlights the "essence" of the female form. Weston's photography sought to enlighten the ordinary individual to the world of the Transcendentalists. By emphasizing the "essence" of the female form that compromises the nude, Weston attempts to demonstrate the glory of a transcendent state through a study of the physical world.

⁶ Peeler, 196.

Annotated Bibliography

Coesfeld, Margaret Denny. Robinson Jeffers and Edward Weston: The Primacy of Perception. California: San Francisco State University, 1987.

This thesis, written for a M.A in English Literature, was a most excellent source. Coesfeld's thesis aimed to parallel the careers of Jeffers and Weston. Her extensive study was rich in information, and she kept her analysis of Weston separate from that of Jeffers.

Peeler, David. "Power, Autonomy, and Weston's Imagery: A Balancing Act", History of Photography, 15: Autumn ,1991.

This article went into detail explaining Weston's ideology and involvement with the Transcendentalists. The article discussed Weston's perspective, and then demonstrated how he sought to show his perspective through his work. This article was most useful in gaining a sense of Weston's aims as a photographer.

Pits, Terence, Edward Weston: 1886-1958 Koln: Taschen, 1999.

This book contains a broad scope of Weston's work, allowing one to understand how Weston's ideology is expressed in his landscapes, still life, and figural studies. In addition, the introduction contains a thorough account of Weston's life and career as an artist.