

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Circle 5-8900 Cable: Modernart

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WALL LABEL - THE PHOTOGRAPHER'S EYE

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The invention of photography provided a radically new picture-making process-- and a new order of picture-making problems. The abilities and limitations of the technique meant that traditional pictorial solutions were often useless. In large degree, the photographer was disinherited of the old artistic traditions. He was forced to find new ways to make his meaning clear.

A few photographers tried to reconcile the conflict between the new technique and traditional artistic values, but for the most part photography grew by trial and error. Most photographers worked without the discipline of academy or guild, without a common training, without agreement on matters of craft or aesthetics, and often without knowledge of each others work.

Under such conditions photography produced a flood of images. From this massive, unsupervised, continuing experiment has come, by natural selection, a growing understanding of the unique characteristics of the medium--a growing understanding of what we mean when we say photographic.

The emergence of this special visual language has conditioned our sight, our language, and our imagery. This exhibition illustrates some of the qualities that seem basic to its way of seeing.

THE THING ITSELF

More convincingly than any other picture, a photograph evokes the tangible presence of reality. Its most fundamental use and its broadest acceptance has been as a substitute for the subject itself--a simpler, more permanent, more clearly visible version of the plain fact.

Our faith in the truth of a photograph rests on our belief that the lens is impartial, and will draw the subject as it is, neither nobler nor meaner. This faith may be naive and illusory (for though the lens draws the subject, the photographer defines it), but it persists. The photographer's vision convinces us to the degree that the photographer hides his hand.

"There is a terrible truthfulness about photography. The ordinary academician gets hold of a pretty model, paints her as well as he can, calls her Juliet, and puts a nice verse from Shakespeare underneath, and the picture is admired beyond measure.

"The photographer finds the same pretty girl, he dresses her up and photographs her, and calls her Juliet, but somehow it is no good--it is still Miss Wilkins, the model. It is too true to be Juliet."

George Bernard Shaw 1909

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THE DETAIL

Once he left his studio, it was impossible for the photographer to copy the painters' schemata. He could not stage-manage the battle, like Uccello or Velasquez, bringing together elements which had been separate in space and time, nor could he rearrange the parts of his picture to construct a design that pleased him better.

From the reality before him he could only choose that part that seemed relevant and consistent, and that would fill his plate. If he could not show the battle, explain its purpose and its strategy, or distinguish its heroes from its villains, he could show what was too ordinary to paint: the empty road scattered with cannon balls, the mud encrusted on the caisson's wheels, the anonymous faces, the single broken figure by the wall.

Intuitively, he sought and found the significant detail. His work, incapable of narrative, turned toward symbol.

"What is the picture of the drum, without the marks on its head where the beating of the sticks has darkened the parchment?"

Oliver Wendall Holmes 1857

"If your pictures aren't good, you aren't close enough."

Robert Capa 1947

THE FRAME

To quote out of context is the essence of the photographer's craft. His central problem is a simple one: what shall he include, what shall he reject? The line of decision between in and out is the picture's edge. While the draughtsman starts with the middle of the sheet, the photographer starts with the frame.

The photograph's edge defines content.

It isolates unexpected juxtapositions. By surrounding two facts, it creates a relationship.

It interrupts familiar forms, and shows their unfamiliar fragment.

It defines the shapes that surround objects.

The photographer edits the meanings and patterns of the world through an imaginary frame. This frame is the beginning of his picture's geometry. It is to the photograph as the cushion is to the billiard table.

"Putting one's head under the focusing cloth is a thrill...To pivot the camera slowly around watching the image change on the ground-glass is a revelation, one becomes a discoverer...and finally the complete idea is there..."

Edward Weston 1930

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