

The Museum of Modern Art

NO. 85B

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CLARENCE H. WHITE

Wall Label

Photography is most frequently viewed as a sequential medium in which the photographer is the pivotal figure in a series of events that begins with revelation and proceeds through action. The notion is that the recognition of what is photogenic will cause a sequence of responses, the very minimum of which are the manipulations of the craft of photography that lead to the creation of a visual document. Those photographers whose work is characterized by confrontation with social reality operate within this approach. Although by this definition the photographer is not prevented from exploring the surface to expose the significance of outer appearances, he is clearly not a participatory instrument in the scene.

In contrast to this approach is one in which the photographer is involved with the actual contrivance of the subject. By necessity, to work in this way requires a less reactive and more premeditative sensibility. Photographs produced through this approach function as a kind of literature, in which the formulation of elements is not only to be sensed, but read. Photographers working in this area are interested in revealing how things are, rather than showing things as they are, and their pictures often display that precise combination of emotion and reason that causes them to imprint themselves on our consciousness. In his photography Clarence H. White was concerned with this latter approach.

The qualities that make White's photographs so memorable have to do with both form and content. In his finest pictures the disposition of

every element, the relation of each object to every other, is dominated by a confidence that condenses the common aspects of camera vision to an expressive intensity few photographers have managed to attain. It is clear that White was aware of the aesthetic principles of oriental art and indirectly with the work of European modernists through his familiarity with the painters Chase, Sargent, and Whistler; but perhaps a stronger influence were the popular genre illustrators of seventy or eighty years ago whose work he saw in such magazines as The Monthly Illustrator, Munsey's, or Scribner's. Unlike so many of his colleagues who sought to incorporate superficial "impressionist" principles in their photographs, White was able to transform the mere sensory perception of light into an exposition of the most fundamental aspect of photography - the literal materialization of form through light itself. His prints, mostly in the platinum medium, display a richness, subtlety, and luminosity rarely achieved at any time in the history of photography.

White's vision was based on his Newark, Ohio, society, and later that of New York; but unlike many of the lesser photographers of his day, and those who followed him in what became known as the pictorial photographic movement, his poetic imagination transformed these local facts into greater truths. He created a style, which at its inception, was unique in photography. He showed that photography relied on contemplation and planning, and that through the continued use of picture subjects that did not vary greatly, he could come to a deeper understanding of their intrinsic emotion. His legacy reinforces our contemporary realization that photographic vision can encompass ideas and attitudes that intensify and mature through the determination successively to plan and to penetrate. The work of Clarence H. White confirms that photography affects us like experience; it shows us what we see.