

MEXICO THROUGH THE LENS OF EDWARD WESTON

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If we consider Manuel Alvarez Bravo to be one of the founders of contemporary Mexican photography—he is the only photographer whose work appears in the Mexico City's Museum of Modern Art next to those of the great muralists—then we can easily appreciate the presence of Edward Weston in Mexico.

This extraordinary photographer, who created the distinctive seal of the Carmel School, arrived in Mexico in 1923, accompanied by his model and student Tina Modotti and his son Chandler. At that time, the effervescence of post-Revolutionary art and the Mexican countryside contributed to Weston's themes, as much as he contributed to the appreciation of incipient contemporary Mexican photography.

Before Alvarez Bravo and Weston, the most important banners of Mexican photography were in the hands of photojournalists, such as Casasola and the Mayo brothers. From Weston on, Mexico would no longer be known in the world solely by images from the Revolution or romantic landscapes.

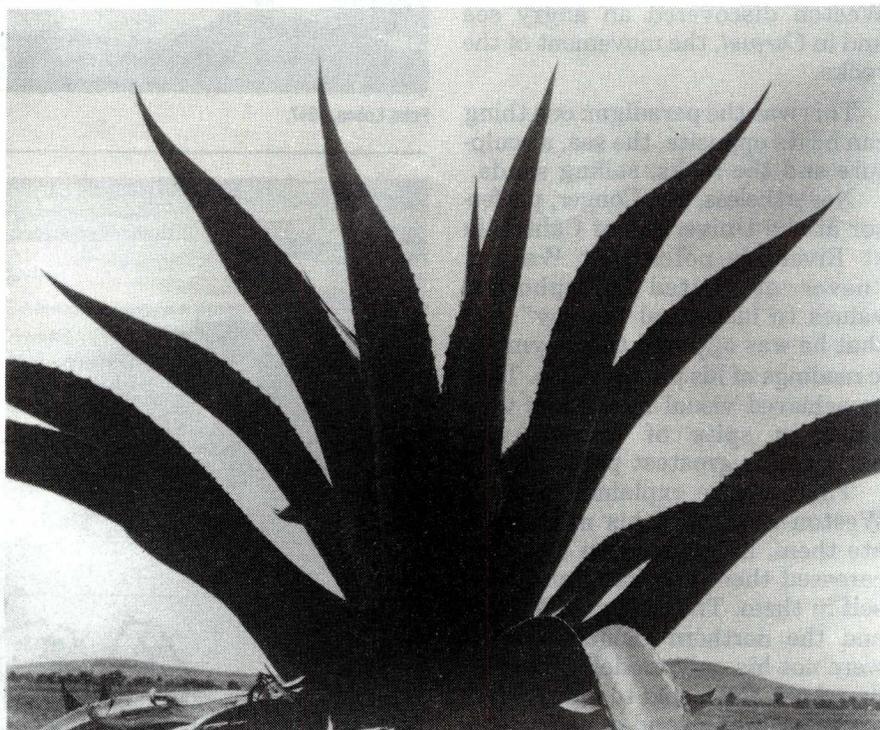
For two years, Modotti, who modelled for Diego Rivera's murals *Germinacion* (Germination) and *La Tierra Virgen* (The Virgin Earth) at the Autonomous University of Chapingo, and Weston formed the

group of painters and muralist of the Mexican "Renaissance," including Siqueiros, Orozco, Jean Charlot, Dr. Atl, O'Higgins, Rivera and others.

Alvarez Bravo had the opportunity to know the talent of both Weston and Modotti at first hand. He was the only person who said goodbye to Modotti when she was deported from Mexico in 1927 for her political views. Since then, he

would become responsible for taking her place in the task of photographing the murals of Mexican painters.

On one occasion, Alvarez Bravo said of Modotti "...she was a great friend of mine. She used to show me her photographs and also those that Edward Weston sent her. Although she and Weston no longer lived together, they continued to be good friends."



Maguey cactus, 1926.

Journalist.

Based on all of this, the importance of the exhibition "The Carmel Photographic Tradition: The Weston Years," at the Mexico City Museum of Modern Art during the months of January and February is evident. This event, prepared by the Monterey Peninsula Museum of Art to commemorate the centennial of Edward Weston's birth (1886-1958), allowed us to appreciate work that had previously only been known via printed means, with the exception of the show organized by his children Brett and Cole, exhibited in 1966 at the same museum.

In addition to representing the Weston family (Edward, Cole, Brett and Warren), the exhibition included works by Imogen Cunningham, Wynn Bullock, Beumont Newhall, Moreley Baer, Willard Van Dyke, Ruth Bernhard, Ansel Adams and other equally important photographers. Some of them, even in more recent times, have contributed to the conversion of the Westonian aesthetic into a paradigm capable of unifying them into a school.

This would be the "aesthetic disorder of nature": branches that do not lead to an exact sky, wrinkled cypresses in movement, shells sleeping in the eternity of their forms, and oceans of sand surprised by shadows. In *The Valley of Death*, Weston discovered an angry sea and in *Carmel*, the movement of the rocks.

This was the paradigm: one thing can be its opposite, the sea, a sculpture and the rocks, sailing sands.

Nevertheless, Dr. Conger, professor at the University of California at Riverside notes that Weston, "never attributed metaphorical values to his visual fantasy" and that he was opposed to all symbolic readings of his photographs. That he achieved visual metaphors very much in spite of himself was perhaps his greatest paradox.

This may be explained because Weston lived with his models, he ate them, he stepped on them, he caressed them and immersed himself in them. The nature of Mexico and the northern California coast were not his only models. Once his daughter, Cole, said to him, "Brett says that he's proud of eating (the still-life) Bell Pepper No. 30 (that his father made famous)."



Point Lobos, 1937.



Point Lobos, 1947.



Monterey Coast, 1940.



Homage to E. Weston, Point Lobos, 1938. Van Deren Coke.

The "Carmel Photographic Tradition" exhibition is presented in Mexico while the Mexican Photography Council, plagued by economic difficulties, is celebrating its tenth anniversary with an exhibition and sale of post cards of Mexican photographers.

The Legacy of the Classics

The exhibition of 80 post cards provides a comprehensive vision of what photography in Mexico is today. This panorama offers a mixture of different styles, themes and aesthetic conceptions, in which one may observe shades of the Carmel School brought to life again through the lenses of young photographers.

This is not because the works deal with tree trunks, rocks, waves and rending clouds but rather because they continue to extract new qualities from objects and from the human figure itself, capturing its impermanence, as in *El Abrazo* ("The Embrace") by Maritza López (1986). It should be remembered that for Weston, the matter of originality—as notes Conger—is virtually lacking in stylistic importance, "...his main concern was the excellence of his own interpretation."

At a time when documentary photography and pamphlet photography in which the linguistic message is the dominant element have achieved greater prominence in Mexico, it is important to re-evaluate the visual metaphors, symbolism and techniques considered by photographers to be classical.

This does not involve the copying of images, but rather the discovery of the essence of creative processes, as achieved by Wynn Bullock in *Navigation without Numbers* (1957), Moreley Baer in *Storm Cloud, Portuguese Cordillera* (1971) or Edward Weston and Brett Weston in their almost identical surfs of dunes (1933 and 1936) and the rephrasing of the nude executed by Edward Weston.

Edward Weston, exhausted by his activities as a portraitist and by the urban environment that surrounded Glendale, came to Mexico with a great capacity for surprise and innocence, for seeing new angles, constructing new links between the models that were offered to him in natural and spontaneous



Oak, Condado de Monterey, 1929.



Pulquería, México, 1926.

form. It is here where he unleashes a storm of creativity. "Mexico was a huge battlefield; I forever lost the mistrustful fury of three years, all concrete and personal love and I won a new, abstract one, a love that embraces all and that has saved me from any danger of becoming a maladjusted neurotic," Weston stated in 1927.

He portrayed *pulquerías*—bars where pulque, and alcoholic beverage made from fermented maguey cactus juice, is served—maguey cactus, public toilets and social figures such as his friends Diego Rivera and senator Manuel Hernández Galván. It is said that before disembarking from the ship, it seemed as if he had never before seen a cloud and he began to study. "A cloud ignited by the sun that ascended from the ocean, a slender white column, higher and higher, toward the glorious climax of the blue paradise..." he wrote in a letter to Johan Hagemeyer.

Apart from the instantaneous photos that he shot while travelling by train, he dedicated himself to in-

depth studies of Teotihuacan, San Cristóbal Ecatepec, Tepotztlán and Baranca de Oblatos, near Guadalajara. In Mexico, the photographer found a source of inspiration that he would never abandon. "Work with still-lives," notes Conger, "landscapes and clouds, begun in Mexico, became an integral part (of his work) for the rest of his career."

Nevertheless, Weston's economic situation was no better than the one he had left in California. He and Modotti survived on shooting portraits and with the income that they received from a contract with the Autonomous National University (UNAM) to illustrate Anita Brenner's book *Idols behind Altars*, a difficult task that required their movement to different places in the country.

And based on what is known from Ansel Adams and Imogen Cunningham, Weston's precarious economic situation did not improve when he returned to the West Coast. "Edward could never allow himself to buy anything from anyone. He

never knew what he could have done," notes Cunningham.

Another of Weston's merits is that he went beyond the dichotomy of the two primitive types of photography inherited from the nineteenth century: documentary and picturesque. Weston, just as Alvarez Bravo, showed ephemeral aspects of Mexico, such as fruits, toys and crafted clay vegetables that are really more than that.

Photographers who have worked in Mexico have been seduced by the country's myth, folklore and cultural paradoxes.

Their observations recorded in images have had multiple functions; they have served as both a chronicle and as publicity. Mexico is a country with a great potential for tourism, but few have been able to see beyond the f-stop 4.5 as did the Westons.

For this reason, the "Carmel Tradition" exhibition, made possible thanks to the museums where it was exhibited and Monterey County, has been a long awaited celebration.