Edward Weston (1886-1958) is renowned as one of the masters of twentieth-century photography. His name evokes images of anthropomorphic still lifes, striking nudes, dramatic coastal landscapes, and stark dunes that embody the brilliant compositions, sharp focus, and exquisite tonalities of the Straight Photography movement. Weston's belief in the purity of natural form and the transcendent beauty in the commonplace led him to create some of the most indelible images in the history of the medium.

This exhibition celebrates a critical chapter in Edward Weston's remarkable career. In the early 1940s, Weston selected and printed five hundred of his masterworks for The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California. This extraordinary gift, the first by the photographer to an institution, was underwritten by the Guggenheim Foundation which had sponsored his photographic odyssey through California and the American West in 1937 and 1938, regarded by Weston as the most productive and satisfying years of his life. Selections from the Huntington's collection are supplemented by key private and public loans in order to convey the breadth of Weston's enduring vision. A key group are on loan from the comprehensive collection of Michael P. Mattis and Judith G. Hochberg who both consider Weston the "Picasso of photography" and have collected his work in depth since the 1980s.

Edward Weston was already an accomplished amateur photographer when he came to California from Illinois in 1906. After a brief course of study in the technical aspects of the trade, Weston took a job with a commercial photographer in downtown Los Angeles. In 1911, he established a portrait studio in the suburb of Tropico (now Glendale). Throughout this early part of his career, Weston made photographs in the atmospheric, soft-focus manner then in fashion. In the 1920s, a stylistic shift occurred in Weston's work, and he began striving for clean lines, dramatic contrasts, and sharp focus. The transformation was complete by the time Weston returned in 1926 from an extended sojourn in Mexico. (right: Rubber Dummies, MGM, 1939, Photograph by Edward Weston. © 1981 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents)

The next two years would see Weston consumed with making close-up, intimate studies of vegetables, shells, and the nude female body. This intense phase of concentrated work inside the studio -- painstakingly posing, lighting, and experimenting with still life -- turned outward when Weston moved his portrait business to the small coastal village of Carmel in 1929. There he discovered the exceptional beauty of nearby Point Lobos where he focused on the striking geological formations, cypress trees, and flora and fauna that uniquely defined the area. Through the mid-1930s, Weston continued to explore form both in the studio and natural settings, looking for the very essence of an object, or the "thing itself" as he called it, "the quintessence revealed direct, without the fog of impressionism."
Edward Weston was fifty-one years old when he became the first photographer to receive a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1937. For nearly three decades he had thought about, written on, and executed his work. He was a respected leader in the field, having participated extensively in one-person and group exhibitions, received numerous awards, and published a book of photographs to much acclaim. Yet for all the accolades, Weston had never been able to pursue photography without financial constraint. Now Weston had the means to travel, and he and his companion, Charis Wilson, began an epic road trip that covered over twenty thousand miles in seven states.

Weston claimed no documentary or historical intent with his Guggenheim project. It was purely an aesthetic mission, exploring "the universality of basic form" in a region he knew and loved. Whether in the canyons of Death Valley, the snowfields of Yosemite, or the forests of the Pacific Northwest, these travels had a liberating, energizing effect on Weston. He experimented with landscape as never before, and his compositions opened up, becoming freer and less tightly controlled than in the intimate studies that characterize his earlier work. Weston considered his fellowship years as the capstone of his career. (right: Juniper, Sierra Nevada, 1937, Photograph by Edward Weston. © 1981 Center for Creative Photography, Arizona Board of Regents)

-- Gail Stavitsky, Chief Curator

(based on brochure copy by Jennifer A. Watts, Curator of Photographs, Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens, for the exhibition Edward Weston: A Legacy, 2003)

Books on Edward Weston are available for reference in the Museum's Le Brun Library and for sale in the Museum Store:


Editors note: RL readers may also enjoy:

- Edward Weston: A Photographer's Love of Life (11/15/04)
- Edward Weston: Life Work (10/1/04)
- Edward Weston: Life Work (5/3/04)
- Brett Weston in Hawaii (1/15/04)
- Edward Weston: A Photographer’s Love of Life (11/11/03)
- Edward Weston: A Vision Conserved (6/25/03)
- Margrethe Mather and Edward Weston: A Passionate Collaboration (6/25/03)
- Alfred Stieglitz: Entrepreneur of Modern Art; essay by Don Gray (7/22/02)
- Edward Weston: Photography and Modernism (4/9/02)
- The Model Wife (11/24/00)
- In Praise of Nature: Ansel Adams and Photographers of the American West (3/3/00)
- In Praise of Nature: Ansel Adams and Photographers of the American West (12/3/99)
- American Modernism from the Stieglitz Group (11/4/99)
- Edward Weston and Modernism (9/23/99)
- Brett Weston in New York (9/17/99)
- Modotti and Weston: Mexicanidad (8/2/99)
- Edward Weston, Photography and Modernism (5/15/99)

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